Bible Journal 2012/2014

Genesis 1-2 Jan 1, 2012 Matthew 1

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.

We may never know the age of the earth- young? Old? What happened to the dinosaurs? What we DO KNOW is that GOD created the Earth and everything (and everybody) on it. We must know and acknowledge our origins with God to truly understand anything. That's why Genesis (literally "beginnings") is so important.

God went through an orderly progression in creation, and labeled all He had made as "good". We must remember that sin had not yet entered the world to mar God's perfect creation.

Then God rested…we find this again in Scripture in Hebrews- the "believer's rest" (Heb. 4:1) that mirrors what God must have done…rest from labors of righteousness (right living). In this case, God was "right-creating!"

Note in verse 5 Chapter 2 that it had not yet rained…more on this later with Noah.

Gen 2:23-24

23 The man said,

"This is now bone of my bones
and flesh of my flesh;
she shall be called 'woman,'
for she was taken out of man."

24 That is why a man leaves his father and mother and is united to his wife, and they become one flesh.

Whenever we want to see the original perfect pattern for humankind- male and female- we need to look at this passage. The man valued, treasured and cherished the woman- she was literally "part of him"!

Matthew 1

Matthew 1 is largely the genealogy of Jesus.

Some of the many beautiful symmetries in Scripture are at the end of the first passage of Matthew 1:

17 Thus there were fourteen generations in all from Abraham to David, fourteen from David to the exile to Babylon, and fourteen from the exile to the Messiah.

So many times in the Christmas story we overlook the amazing obedience of Joseph:

24 When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife. 25 But he did not consummate their marriage until she gave birth to a son. And he gave him the name Jesus.

God indeed picked the perfect earthly Father for Jesus- any surprise?

Genesis 3-5 January 2, 2012 Matthew 2

The "crafty serpent" offered Adam and Eve what they already wanted (or thought they wanted) – to "be like God"

Gen 3:1

1 Now the serpent was more crafty than any of the wild animals the LORD God had made. He said to the woman, "Did God really say, 'You must not eat from any tree in the garden'?"

This is exactly what Satan does- he lies, deceives and twists the truth until it becomes the half-truth that we want it to be.

And the deed is done- perfect Creation shattered and sin has entered in…and our (and their) first impulse is to hide- first from God and then from the consequences of our disobedience.
Already the perfect plan of salvation through Jesus appears:

14 So the LORD God said to the serpent, "Because you have done this,
"Cursed are you above all livestock
and all wild animals!
You will crawl on your belly
and you will eat dust
all the days of your life.
15 And I will put enmity
between you and the woman,
and between your offspring and hers;
he will crush your head,
and you will strike his heel."

Note that He (Jesus) will crush Satan's head…already looking forward to Revelation. We must remember that God is not limited by time- He sees the whole picture all at once- the "beginning" and the "end"- maybe that's why Jesus reminds us that He is Lord among so many other things- of time itself (the Alpha and Omega).
Adam and Eve are forbidden from touching the Tree of Life- we will see this tree again in Revelation. Even though they did not live forever- they lived a LONG time before the Flood.
In Genesis 4 we see the first family- and the first dysfunctional family. One son murders another out of jealous rage and is condemned to walk the earth as a nomad. God even has mercy on him- a reminder and a tribute to His mercy as well as His judgment.
Genesis 5 is the first of many tracings of lineage- so important to God's people in that God made promises to their bloodline (their tribe or DNA grouping) which He kept always. The people He called were to keep this blood line (and more importantly their spiritual bloodline) pure and unmixed.
In Genesis 5:32 we see the fathers of the three large groups of humankind- Shem (the Semites) Ham (the persons of color) and Japheth (the European/Caucasian race).

Matthew 2

In Matthew 2 we see God's grace in preventing the baby Jesus from man's (and from the enmity of all that is God's perfect creation- Satan's) destruction. First the Magi (who probably came much later- perhaps almost a year after the shepherds) deceive Herod and then God's angel warns Joseph to flee to Egypt. How many times Egypt appears as a central location for God's perfect plans and purposes!
The destruction of so many innocent children was prophesied by Jeremiah (31:15):

18 "A voice is heard in Ramah,
weeping and great mourning,
Rachel weeping for her children
and refusing to be comforted,
because they are no more."

Once again Joseph is warned in two different dreams as to where he should live with Jesus. The choice of dwelling places was fulfillment of the prophecy (which I can't

find at present) that “He should be called a Nazarene”. Some scholars feel this is a reference to Isaiah 11:1.

Genesis 6-8 January 3, 2012 Matthew 3

Genesis 6 starts with a passage that continues to be a mystery to many …who are these “sons of God”? (verse 2). And to make the mystery even deeper, who are the “Nephilim” in verse 4? This “super race” may be the source of many of the ancient stories of the “gods and goddesses”- particularly handsome/beautiful or talented (and physically large and strong) beings. It is worth noting that Genesis lists the limits of human life to be about 120 years- almost the exact age predicted by modern science to be a person’s life span in the absence of disease.

The main theme of these verses centers on the wickedness of mankind, who performed acts of evil as naturally as breathing. Apparently only Noah (and by implication his family) was righteous. Another striking theme here is that God requires complete (perfect) obedience (see especially verse 22). He knew the dimensions of the ark that would save this remnant of humanity, just as He knows what would ultimately be needed to save us from our sins. In verse 18 we see the first covenant between man and God- which God never breaks (and never will!).

In Genesis 7 we see more detail to the requirement of “two of each kind of animal”. The clean animals (and we must assume God had taught Noah which these were) were to be seven in number (seven is one of the “perfect” numbers in Scripture). Notice again in Genesis 7:5 Noah’s **complete obedience**.

Noah was 600 years old when the Flood occurred. Both the “springs of the great deep” and the “floodgates of heaven” poured forth water- a double “drowning” of the earth! But God was protecting Noah- see the wording in verse 18 when God “shut him in” And so the waters flooded for 150 days. (NOTE- has anyone ever studied the creatures of the sea -were they eliminated as well?) Apparently at least one species of plant survived- the olive tree which was growing on a mountain (and thus may have escaped the flood).

In Genesis 8 we see that God sent a “wind over the earth” (verse 1) and that the waters receded. In the seventeenth day of the seventh month the ark came to rest on the “mountains of Ararat” (and not specifically Mount Ararat according to the NIV translation), In verses 16-19 there is a “re-creation” of the earth’s creatures- they once again are freed to populate the earth. The only humans left were the righteous Noah and his family- a sort of second chance at the creation which God had labored to create.

Genesis 8 ends with Noah worshipping God- building an altar- and the aroma of the smoke (and the praise and worship) pleased God. Yet God knew that “every inclination of the human heart” was evil (verse 21). We must remember that Noah was still an imperfect human- as we clearly see in Genesis 9- but this imperfect creature was capable of participating in the fellowship and worship that God created humankind for!

Matthew 3

John the Baptizer (Baptist) is the center of Matthew 3…he is “just a stagehand” as suggested in the Message translation- but a key figure in God’s revelation of who His Son was and what He was to do.

John made several things very clear 1) he was not limited by the conventions of culture and dress 2) he was a fearless prophet who dared criticize the recognized religious leaders and authorities of his day (Pharisees and Sadducees), and 3) he was the harbinger of the "real baptism"- not with water but with the Spirit!

John was so sure of his importance relative to Jesus' importance that he initially questioned Jesus being baptized by him- he reasoned (and by human standards correctly) that he was in need of baptism by Jesus. Yet Jesus was teaching John (and us) that He must complete the dedication and purification of submersion (and submission to God).

God affirms His pleasure with His Son by sending a dove (the Holy Spirit) and a voice which testified *"This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased."* So Jesus (as we) please God by obedience and by separating and dedicating our very lives in His service. This is righteousness (right living) which Jesus said He was to fulfill in verse 15. May we be so eager and focused (and filled with the Spirit!).

Genesis 9-11 January 4, 2012 Matthew 4

*Then God blessed Noah and his sons….*The beginning of Genesis 9 is the result of Noah's worship- when Noah was faithful, obedient and involved in worship- God blessed him…Just as God blesses us today when we are engaged in true worship. Note that in verse 3 that "everything" would now be food for Noah- including the animals- which were presumably not part of his diet until that point. A very key principle is introduced here- that the "lifeblood" (verses 4-6) should be removed from the animal before eating it- the preciousness and sanctity of life are captured here- we are accountable- as the Scripture teaches here and elsewhere- for even the lifeblood of an animal! The sacrifice of the animals included the shedding of their lifeblood- showing that sin is forgiven only with shedding of blood.

God- the covenant maker- sets the rainbow in the clouds in verse 13 as a reminder of His steadfastness and faithfulness. All is well until Noah overindulges in the wine he has just made and lay naked in his tent. The youngest son did not turn away from his father's shame and was cursed- just as Shem and Japheth were blessed for trying to preserve their father's modesty, Noah's 960 years are remarkable- very few biblical figures outlived him- perhaps a testimony to his importance in God's plan of restoration of humanity.

Chapter 10 recounts the genealogy of the three sons of Noah- note that the Hamites occupied land near the borders of Canaan (verse 19). And then we come to the amazing story of the Tower of Babel. Although God had wiped the slate clean, the sinful nature of man showed through clearly in the arrogance and self-reliance of the nations who proposed to build a tower in a plain in Shinar- located in present day Iraq.

Babylon and Assyria

The people building the Tower had a goal *"to build a city, with a tower that reaches to the heavens, so that we may make a name for ourselves..."* (verse 4). Doesn't sound so terrible, does it? But God knew their hearts and saw this as a clear attempt of humankind to glorify itself and reach for equality with God. God said "let US go down and confuse their language so they will not understand each other" (verse 7). Note the PLURAL (God, His Son and the Holy Spirit- coeternal) and the amazingly intelligent strategy to divide the people into smaller groups who could not communicate. God's plan was to scatter all of them across the earth- a plan he would not allow to be denied,

Following this account is the lineage of Abram- the next key figure in Scripture. Abrams' immediate family in named in verses 27 and following. It is worthy of note that Abram's father (Terah) died in Haran- a place that became the home for Abram and his family. Shortly Abram will be asked to leave his home.

Matthew 4

Jesus was LED by the Spirit to the wilderness- this was not an accident or haphazard event. I have often been particularly drawn to the Gospel accounts of Jesus in the wilderness- probably for several reasons- 1) not many of us are willing to fast one day, let alone 40; 2) Jesus spent time in prayer and meditation (my interpretation)- seeking God's will and plan for His life 3) one of the stated reasons in Scripture is that Jesus went to be TEMPTED. Sure enough, Satan appears and offers three things that Jesus may have desired or needed- first the very bread that he had denied Himself- He was hungry and could have satisfied His immediate needs by a miraculous transformation of stone into bread- but instead He had learned to feast on God's Word (Deuteronomy 8:3). Jesus was then tempted to show how He would receive a miraculous rescue, and again answered out of God's Word (Deuteronomy 6:16). The last temptation was perhaps the most tempting- to become an earthly King- to bypass God's plan and (most likely) avoid the sacrificial death the He was born to undergo. Here Jesus answers directly from the Word *("Worship the Lord your God...: Deuteronomy 6:13*) When we carry the Word within us, we are equipped to resist Satan (*Psalm 119:11 Thy word have I hid in mine heart, that I might not sin against thee.* KJV) Our challenge, then is to be people of the Word!

Jesus then calls His disciples- first the two fishermen/brothers Simon and Andrew… who left "at once (verse 20). In similar fashion, Jesus called James and Jon (sons of

Zebedee)- also fishermen- the Scripture teaches – (verse 22)…*and immediately they left the boat and their father and followed Him.* Our first impulse is usually to "count the cost", to rationalize, to think up "many excellent reasons" why WE should not follow- and yet the blessing is so great for those with singleness of purpose and willingness to follow!

Note the activities of Jesus after gathering these four men- 1) teaching in the synagogues; 2) preaching the good news of the kingdom; 3) and healing EVERY disease and sickness (caps mine). No disease can resist the healing touch of the Master! And as is no surprise, the response was immediate and overwhelming- who wouldn't want to be healed by this young teacher- especially those with hopeless, incurable, or disfiguring illness.

Genesis 12-14 January 5, 2012 Matthew 5:1-26

"So Abram left as the Lord had told him, and Lot went with him. Abram was seventy five years old when he set out from Haran." (Gen 12:4) Imagine leaving all you knew and were familiar with…to go to an unknown place -at 75! I am reminded of my own father who reinvented himself at age 70…went back to college to get an Associate degree in art and worked in an Elderhostel with my stepmother. He was not afraid to go in a new direction and follow his heart (and his dreams)- neither should we be,

"Leave" God told Abram- leave everything you are familiar with and comfortable with- and go to a land I will show you. Never mind that Abram had never seen the land, or fully appreciated God's promises to date- after all- he was still childless! With God's promises to make him a "great nation" still ringing in his ears, Abram left (…as the Lord had told him…verse 4) Abram shows his continued trust and great faith in God when he sets up an altar east of Bethel (Beth El) ad "called on the name of the Lord" (verse 8)

Once again Egypt is to play a critical role in God's plans. Because there was a famine, Abram went to Egypt- and instructed Sarai to lie and tell the Egyptians she was his sister. How often do we try to "fix things" and make them come out our way by entering into deceit! Because Sarai was really Abram's wife (technically a half-sister) God inflicted Pharaoh and his household. Note how Pharaoh instinctively holds the moral and right thing up to Abram…"Why did you say "She is my sister"?.

In Chapter 13 we see a reference to Abram's wealth. Wealth in those times was measured in children, slaves and livestock. Abram certainly had slaves and livestock- no children yet! Once again he returns to the site of his previous worship (east of Bethel and called on the name of the Lord. So Abram is much like us- worshipping and pleasing God and then pleasing ourselves- what a divided life we lead. As is almost inevitable between two powerful men, disputes arose- first among the herdsmen of Lot and Abram and then among the two (uncle and nephew) themselves. Lot chose the more appealing land, despite the fact that the people of Sodom were notoriously wicked, Abram leaves to pitch his tents in Mamre at Hebron, and again built an altar to the Lord.

The kings in the OT were frequently kings of a city (not a nation) and in Chapter 14 we see the kings of several cities going to war with each other- Arioch, Kedorlaomer (whose name should be the answer to a trivia question!), and Tidal went to war against Bera, Birsha, Shinah, Shemeber, and the king of Bela. Later the kings of Sodom and Gomorrah's armies became entangled in tar pits- perhaps a metaphor

for the power of the unbridled sin their people engaged in. The four kings pursuing Sodom and Gomorrah's armies captured Lot and his family. Abram took 318 "trained men born in his household" on a commando raid to recover Lot. This is not the first rescue for Lot!

The appearance of Melchizadek (king of Salem) is thought by many to be a pre-incarnate appearance of Jesus. He is a priest (but presumably not a Levite- since their line had not yet begun), and he accepted a tither and worship from Abram. We will see Melchizadek again in Hebrews 7.

Matthew 5:1-26

Jesus preached this sermon on at least two occasions- here in Matthew's gospel (on a mountain) and in Luke's gospel (on a plain). Or perhaps it is the same sermon, and the terrain on which it was presented contained both mountain and plain. The "heavy use of red type" in my NIV study bible here alerts me that this is the Lord Himself speaking, and that I should listen and learn (and apply the truths I learn through the power of the Holy Spirit!)

How blesses (happy, literally bubbling with joy) are we when we follow Jesus' teachings! We can (and should and will) be the "salt and light" of the earth. The amazement and fascination that so many found in Jesus was that His teaching had authority- He spoke out of His unblemished and constant connection with his "Abba Father". He spoke about fulfilling the law- "making it FULL and COMPLETE" with the illumination that only God's Son could provide.

Genesis 15-17 January 6, 2012 Matthew 5:27-48

Abram was gifted with visions from God. This is one of the many ways that our Father communicates with us. This vision had an important comfort from God:

"Do not be afraid, Abram. I am your shield, your very great reward" (verse 1)

Abram did not understand HOW God would fulfill a central promise made to him- that of children and many descendants- so Abram offered God his version of a plan to accomplish this- an heir from among the servants in his household- specifically, Eliezer God then replied that His (God's) plan was different and perfect- the son was to come from Abram himself, from "your own body" (verse 4), God then assured Abram that his descendants would be as numerous as the stars. The following verse is one of the KEY verses in Scripture:

"Abram believed the Lord, and he credited it to him as righteousness." (verse 6).

The belief we see here is vastly more than intellectual assent- Abram both received God's Words (and directions) and acted on them. His belief and obedience were welded together in a unified whole. The belief Abram had was not only in God Himself but in the Savior to come- who Abram had already unsuspectingly seen in Melchizadek.

The following scene of the covenant ceremony is a dark and mysterious one. Verse 12 says Abram went into a deep sleep- we may conclude that this covenant was so important that God played both the role of covenant giver/maker and covenant receiver. The halving of the animals was symbolic of the oath that "may I be divided in two as these animals are if I break this covenant. In Chapter 17 we see a "blazing torch" which appears and passes through the halved animals. The covenant has now been made- and Abram will reap the promises God has made!

During the course of the covenant making, God renames Abram “exalted father” as Abraham “father of many”. Sarai also is renamed Sarah. God promises he will bless Sarah and that she will bear a son- from which will come nations and kings of people (and ultimately the King of Kings!). Despite the enormity and significance of the covenant just established between Abram and God, Abram still is groping in the dark for answers and solutions to his childlessness. His answer is to conceive a child by his maidservant Hagar. The product of this union (man’s solution) is Ishmael- the father of the people in the Middle East whose constant warfare with the Hebrews is both history and present reality. This is Abram’s second attempt to solve his problem of childlessness- and shows clearly the fruits of following what WE decide rather than “waiting upon the Lord” (Psalm 27:14)

Matthew 5:27-48

Jimmy Carter famously confessed that he had “committed adultery in his heart” and therefore was guilty in a Scriptural sense of the sin of adultery. The sin of adultery is, however, more general than strictly sexual lust and adultery. When God’s people consistently turned away from God to serve “other gods”, they (and we) are guilty of this sin. In fact, ANYTHING that breaks our fellowship with God is a sin worthy of our remembering, claiming and repenting from. Jesus’ teaching about removing the parts of our physical body that sin is clearly meant as a teaching to emphasize the seriousness of sin- and is a deliberate exaggeration to make a larger truth clear.

Parallel to Jesus’ treatment of adultery is His teaching on divorce. The Old Testament requirements of a certificate of divorce were an improvement on the simple abandonment that divorce once meant- the certificate was at least an acknowledgement and a document to provide the divorced spouse with some legal standing and protection. Jesus’ standard is much higher. Except in the case of constant unfaithfulness, divorce is outside of God’s will for us.

Oaths are to be taken seriously (see especially the story of Jepthah in Judges). However the temple (or the altar of the temple) does not raise our promises to a higher moral level- only God can do that. Matthew’s gospel says it simply and clearly here- let your “yes” be yes and your “no” be no (Matthew 5:37 KJV).

Jesus teaches here clearly to “overcome evil with good” (Romans 12:21). This was the basis of much of the civil disobedience movement and of Gandhi’s resistance to British colonial rule. The key thing we must remember is that this teaching illustrates God’s way of dealing with evil- the only one that truly works.

Jesus concludes this segment of His teaching with a startling command- LOVE your enemies. I remember seeing a poster with pictures of known Muslim terrorists and the caption was “Pray for these men”. Although so much inside us resists this notion- it is clearly and truly God’s way to solve this problem of extreme evil- one heart and one life at a time. The is amazing power available to those who diligently pray for their enemies!

Carol's birthday is today…I am so grateful that God brought her into my life!

The story of Abrahams' three visitors is a good illustration of hospitality- both in the culture of that day as well as now. A person with the gift of hospitality sees that those visiting are made comfortable, that their needs are met with grace and speed, and that they are shown by actions and words that they are part of our family- even if for only the moment. The Scriptures elsewhere tell us to practice hospitality, for by doing so we may entertain angels unaware (Hebrews 13:2 paraphrase from KJV). The fact is that Abraham WAS entertaining (sowing hospitality) to three angels. Their message was a critical one both for Abram and for us- Abraham was to bear a son by his wife Sarah- who previously was barren! Sarah laughed to herself- understandable since her age and previous inability to bear children was a fact of her life. Yet God does things His way- the seemingly impossible becomes possible (Matt 19:26),

When Abraham learns the awful truth about God's coming judgment against Sodom, he pleads for God to spare the city- if only for the sake of a few. This to me shows how completely God's mercy and judgment are mixed. Only ten righteous men would have saved the city- our conclusion is that ten could not be found.

I have never clearly understood why the "three angels" in Genesis 18 suddenly are reduced in number to "two angels" (Gen 19:1). Lot tried to offer them hospitality, but the men of Sodom are so wicked that they track down these two visitors and demand they be brought out of Lot's house so they could have sex with them (Gen 19:5). The two angels confront these evil men and strike them blind- reminiscent of the two witnesses in Revelation (11:5) who consume their enemies with fire. God's power in resisting evil is truly awesome!

God warns Lot to leave- with all those he loves- for the judgment is coming. Some of the later Old Testament prophets who describe the "day of the Lord (Joel 2 and others) must have seen some of the meaning of that "day" in the description of the massive destruction we see here. Lot's wife looks back- though she was told not to, and becomes a pillar of salt (Gen 19:26). How many times do we disobey, and yet God's mercy is so great that He preserves our lives- how amazingly patient and merciful He is! In verse 29 we see God's mercy clearly in that He "remembered Abraham"(verse 19), and recued Lot.

Reminiscent of Noah getting drunk right after he was saved, Lot's two daughters desired to preserve their bloodline and devised a plan to get their father drunk and become pregnant by him. The fruits of their misguided plan are the Ammonites and Moabites- ever present enemies of God's people.

Matthew 6

Jesus reminds us how easy (and tempting) it is to do good works "for show". It has always interested me that Jesus spoke of hypocrites- this word comes from the Greek word meaning "actors" Only acting like we love God and follow His Son is not enough- God requires (and deserves) the real thing!

Praying in secret requires a secret place. John Wesley had a literal "prayer closet"… mine is my walking/jogging. In the midst of physical exercise I can clear my mind, pray in intercession and LISTEN to God. I need to do more listening to Him. Jesus assumes that we will fast as part of our spiritual growth- this practice is seldom

observed in Western culture or Christianity- and can be the source of centering and power. Jesus after all fasted for 40 days to begin His ministry.

Jesus also preaches clearly and powerfully about "treasure" and asks us to look at whatever we value the most- if it's not eternal then we are wasting our time with things that will not survive. Jesus' comments about eyes are particularly meaningful to me since I have had cataracts since birth (congenital). My prayer is that I will summon the courage to have them removed this summer…I pray that God will use this experience to help me see Him better.

Most of us worry- most of our worry accomplishes nothing or worse still causes us physical and emotional damage. Jesus advice is so clear- but for most of us so hard to take:

*"…therefore do not worry about tomorrow…"(*verse 34).My prayer is that I will quit playing "What if?" with my life and simply trust God for everything.

Genesis 20-22 January 8, 2012 Matthew 7

Abraham again moves at God's direction and again finds himself in the same lie as in Chapter 12- this time he tells the king Abimelech that Sarah is "his sister"- a convenient half-truth. The king of Gerer than found out through a dream that Abram had lied, but that God had prevented him from touching Sarah. How many times God has to intervene and straighten out the messes we make! When confronted Abram used an interesting defense*…"I said to myself, there is surely no fear of God in this place, and they will kill me because of my wife."* (verse 11). He then goes on to state "she really is my sister" (verse 12). So Abraham, as we are, assumes that we alone are righteous (at least compared to the "heathen" around us, and play fast and loose with the truth if it serves our interests. This is both encouraging and discouraging- Abraham was regarded by God as a righteous man (worthy of a covenant to produce God's people) and yet Abram seems to commit one sin after another. God's amazing grace is so clear here. Abraham does show a restored and right spirit in verse 17 when he prays to God for Abimelech and his household to be healed.

Chapter 21 prepares us to see God's miracle in Sarah. The Scripture says *"God was gracious to Sarah"* (verse 1)- and did what He promised. We are- but should never be_ surprised when God keeps His word. As was God's requirement in covenant, Isaac was circumcised on the eight day of his young life. Isaac means "laughter"- reminding us not only of his mother's laughter but the joy that he and his descendants would bring to God. As is common in most families, a rivalry and jealousy grew between Sarah and Hagar- which grew to the point that Abraham sent Hagar and Ishmael away. God shows His great mercy towards Hagar and Ishmael by rescuing them both from the desert and blessing Ishmael. It is notable that Ishmael got a wife from Egypt- he was to be the father of the Arabic rivals of the Israelites. Abraham then makes an oath – a peace treaty- with Abimelech at a place called Beersheba "well of the oath"- a reminder to both of them of the well which was the source of dispute between them. The Scriptures then tell us that "Abraham stayed in the land of the Philistines a long time" (verse 33).

Chapter 22 presents one of the great truths of Scripture- the need for sacrifice to cover sin, and the provision of God for the sacrifice. Abraham was severely tested- the very son whom God had promised – and through whom God would bring His people) was to be sacrificed. God has never required or approved human sacrifice-

and yet His command to Abraham was to make just that sacrifice- of the son that he loved. When God rescues Isaac from Abraham's dagger, God is satisfied that Abraham is truly obedient. We can only imagine what Abraham was thinking on the journey up the mountain with Isaac- was God going to resurrect Isaac from the dead (He could!)- was this not really the son that God would use to establish His covenant people (He said that it was). In verse 18, Abraham "saw a ram caught by its horns" and thus the substitution was made. This is just as God allowed His Son to be sacrificed and was a substitute for our sin. Notice in verse 15 that God swears "by Himself"- pointing to the highest moral standard and promise keeping that can be made.

I am delighted that one of Nahor's sons is named "Buz"!

Matthew 7

So many wonderful teachings of Jesus here. One wonders if these were part of a recurring sermon (or sermon series)- but we are blessed that these have been preserved for us.

1) Judging others (verse 1-6) Only God has the perspective and fairness to judge.. we see only a small part of the truth and this through prejudiced eyes. How foolish (and sinful!) we are when we judge others.
2) Asking, Seeking and Knocking (verses 7-12) Later in Scripture we are told that we "have not because we ask not" (James 4:2 KJV). How little we expect from God, how small and insignificant are our dreams and visions. The Golden Rule is expounded here in verse 12).
3) Narrow and Wide Gates (verses 13-14). In a vivid image, Jesus teaches that so many have lost their way- or never even asked for directions. Our tendency is to condemn these "sinners" the truth is they are persons God loves and are to be sought out and included in our circle of faith.
4) A Tree and Its Fruit (verses 15-23) Some of the most troubling words in the New Testament. "Not everyone who says to me 'Lord, will enter the kingdom of heaven". We are judged by our fruits- saved and transformed lives, How many of us have truly witnessed, reached out and helped someone else see their need for Jesus?
5) The Wise and Foolish Builders (verse 24-27). What a contrast in building your life on the eternal (the solid rock) as opposed to the transient! We must remind ourselves over and over to keep this heavenly perspective as we build our lives. As the Psalmist says (Psalm 127:1 NIV) "Unless the Lord builds the house, its builders labor in vain".

When Jesus finished, the crowds were "amazed". This Teacher was speaking from God's own heart and wisdom- He knew of which He spoke!

Genesis 23-24 January 9, 2012 Matthew 8

Sarah had a long and wonderful life, and was buried y her loving husband in what was to become the Promised Land. The Hittites probably did not realize the plan God had for this land. Chapter 24 opens with the statement *"Abraham was now old and well advanced in years, and the Lord had blessed him in every way"* (verse 1).

What a wonderful thing it would be if this were the epitaph of us all…rich in blessing and living a long and fruitful life!

The beautiful story of Isaac and Rebekah begins in Chapter 24. Rebekah did as the Lord prompted her, and by showing kindness to a stranger cemented the family of Isaac- the family through whom God would work in mighty ways. She was the RIGHT person for Isaac- pure and of the family that God had blessed- she was one of God's chosen people waiting for her moment in history- and like so many of us, unaware of her key role in God's plan. I have always been so impressed with her willingness to go- leave the comfort of her family and take her place in God's plan. In verse 50 we see Laban and Bethuel agreeing "This is from the Lord "- sometimes we do see so clearly what God's will is for us. As this part of the story ends, we see the wonderful words "So she became his (Isaac's) wife, and he loved her." (verse 67). And what a comfort Rebekah was to Isaac in the recent loss of his mother.

Matthew 8

*"And when He came down from the mountainside, the crowds followed Him."(*verse 1). So many times we are on the MOUNTAIN TOP and must descend to the real world below- the world filled with trouble, sickness and pain. Yet Jesus was always ready and willing to teach, heal, and provide comfort to those around Him. He is always "willing" (verse 3). I have always enjoyed the story of the faithful centurion. I've never heard a sermon in this topic, but it will "preach"- faith is not limited to the "usual suspects"- those who SHOULD exhibit faith- but it is found in many unexpected places.

When Jesus heals Peter's mother, it was not just so she could wait on the "men" (verse 15). Instead Jesus shows His compassion and concern for one of His adopted family. The many demon possessed who were healed next were healed so that we could see part of what Isaiah saw in God's prophetic visions- that Jesus was one who "took on our infirmities and carried our diseases"…indeed- He took them to the cross and conquered them.

Jesus warns us to "count the cost" of following Him- even to the point of leaving that which we previously found so important (having a home, burying our parent) and following Him and making Him our first priority always. The cost is high- but the rewards are incalculably satisfying and fulfilling. Jesus is able to calm the storm on the lake (verse 24) and the storms of our lives- if we let Him!

The other side- the side of the lake where the Gentiles lived- was another destination that God called His Son to travel to. In this version of the story, there are TWO demon possessed men. (see Mark 5:9 and Luke 8:30 for other renderings). In all three stories recorded by the Gospel writers, the demons leave the person/people and cause the pigs to rush headlong into the sea. They do this at the single word "Go" from Jesus! The herdsmen and townspeople must have been amazed, frightened and angry- these pigs were, after all, a source of livelihood. We should not be surprised that they pleased with Jesus to leave (verse 34).

Genesis 25-26 January 10, 2012 Matthew 9:1-17

It has always amazed me that Abraham took another wife at his advanced age (verse 1). Abraham did clearly understand that Isaac was the heir that God had promised and blessed, but Abraham did show compassion and generosity to the

sons of his concubines by giving them gifts and sending them to “the land of the east” (verse 6). Did these sons also become the ancestors of Arabic people (as did Ishmael?).

Abraham lived to be 175, above the limit modern science believes the human body will last in absence of serious disease. Clearly God had important things to accomplish with Abraham that took time. He was buried in the land he had bought next to his beloved Sarah, and God “blessed Isaac” (verse 11).

Following this account is a listing of the genealogy of Ishmael. I almost automatically dislike Ishmael, but I am looking through the prism of thousands of years of hostility and bloodshed between the Arabic and Semitic peoples. The Scripture does recount that Ishmael’s sons “lived in hostility toward all their brothers” (verse 18).

God’s plan for His people unfolds in the birth of Esau and Jacob (Israel)- when Isaac’s fervent intercessory prayer results in Rebekah becoming pregnant with twins. So active were they, and so overwhelming their presence within her that she asked God *“Why is this happening to me?”* (Rebekah’s only recorded prayer). How many times I have asked God the same question. But here, as is usually the case, something wonderful is taking place under God’s wise direction. The first son was red “Edom” and hairy “Esau”, followed by the grasping Jacob. It is so important to see that Jacob’s character of grasping and deceiving was evident from his first moment of life- yet God used this grasper and conniver to father His people. As is unfortunately true in some families, one child was loved by one parent more than the other- and Rebekah later tried to use her love to give Jacob the advantage – participating in the deception of her husband Isaac. Even though Esau “despised his birthright” (verse 34) it was wrong od Jacob to use his brother’s hunger to obtain it- out of “weakness”. One could convincingly argue that Jacob was in reality the weaker of the two brothers, at least at this point.

Chapter 26 of Genesis starts with a description of a famine *“beside the earlier famine in Abraham’s time”* (verse 1) which is a recurring theme- a famine causes God’s people to seek food wherever it may be found- as we will see later in the story of Joseph. God warned Isaac not to go to Egypt. This time the answer was found in refuge provided by the Philistine king Abimelech. Isaac, like Abraham before him, lied to the Philistines about his wife- stating that she was his sister. His lie was also uncovered and the leader (Abimelech) was concerned that “one of the men might have slept with your wife” (verse 10). Again we see that the moral compass of the “heathen” was more correct than God’s own people. Woe be to us if we ever take our status with God something to boast about or take for granted (Paul warns us about this in the letter to the Phillipians –Phil 3:7-11). Even so, God continued to bless Isaac – he planted crops (in the midst of a famine!) and “reaped a hundredfold because the Lord blessed him” (verse 12), In fact he became so rich that Abimelech feared and was worried about his power and influence- he asked Isaac to move away. Following a series of disputes over wells (a precious item in this desert land), the Lord spoke to Isaac- to remind him “I am the God of your father Abraham” (verse 24). How many times I must be reminded of that same truth. The chapter concludes with a description of Esau’s marriage and family, who are described as a “source f grief to Isaac and Rebekah” (verse 35)

Matthew 9:1-17

Jesus seems to travel in boats frequently- these must have been a convenient way to move about in the lakeside towns and villages. When He came to His "own town", some men brought Him a paralytic. Jesus' words were unwelcome to the "teachers of the law" who apparently followed Him to see what He would say or do…Jesus simply says *"Take heart, son: your sins are forgiven"* (verse 2). Jesus always heals the whole person- including whatever spiritual sickness might be in us- and frequently addresses this illness first. The "experts" believed (probably sincerely) that this was blasphemy since only God could forgive sin. They could not see (or receive or process) the truth that Jesus was God! As a witness to the "experts", Jesus tells them clearly that this healing is a sign of His authority (just as Moses was given signs by God of his authority).. The result of this healing was that the crowd who witnessed the healing *"were filled with awe and they praised God"* (verse 8)- this is ALWAYS the result of true healing that comes from God.

On Jesus way from this event, He saw a tax collector and simply said "Follow me"- and Matthew got up and followed Him! Sometimes the response God wants from is just that simple- "follow"- but we seem to always have so many reasons not to act in simple obedience.

Genesis 27-28 January 11, 2012 Matthew 9:18-30

Jacob craved Isaac's blessing- so much that he and his mother were willing to deceive the aging and nearly blind Isaac for it! Isaac had given Esau- the firstborn, directions to go hunt, kill and prepare a venison meal and then the blessing would be given. As we see in so many cases in the Bible, the "expected order of things" is often not what actually happens. In the case of blessing- Jacob- nit Isaac- is blessed by his father- Joseph's two sons- Ephriam and Manessah- were also blessed in reverse order- the younger blessed before the older (Genesis 48:17-20).Yet God used this deception to bless Jacob and bring into reality the nation that He had promised to Abraham many years before- a nation that would be a blessing to all and as numerous as the "stars in the sky " (Genesis 15:5 and 22:17). Amazingly, God still had a blessing to give to the forlorn Esau- God promised that Esau would throw the "his yoke from off your neck" (verse 40). Esau understandable was angry at his deceptive brother, and vowed to kill him once their mourning for Isaac was over (verse 41). Rebekah advises Jacob to flee (good advice) and also to keep away from the Hittite women- some of the many [pagans that lived around God's people. Isaac told Jacob the same thing- *"do not marry a Canaanite woman"* (Chapter 28 verse 1). Jacob was to follow this advice and keep the blood line of his people pure. Essau's response is just the opposite- he did exactly what he knew would displease his parents most- and married Mahalath. Jacob's dream at Bethel "Beth El" was the site of his amazing dream (did the rock pillow prompt it?) and God repeats His blessing and promise to Abraham- the Lord stood above the stairway to heaven where the angels were ascending and descending. It always amazes me how much popular culture is based on Scripture (Stairway to Heaven!). Jacob realizes when he awakes that God was "in this place" (verse 16) and renames Luz as "Beth El" ("house of the Lord"). How many times do we need to be made especially aware of God's close and abiding presence! Jacob vows to remember the place where he placed a rock, anointed it with oil, and promises to give God a tenth of all he has.

Matthew 9:18-30

Jesus conquers death! How could anyone miss the eternal significance of this power- Jesus brings a dead girl back to life, and on the way He heals a chronically ill woman out of her faith that she would be well if she could just *"touch His cloak"* (verse 20). Jesus healed- and yet was not *deliberately* healing this woman! Jesus reminds her that "your faith has healed you" (verse 22). A 12 year period of suffering had ended because this woman dared to believe with her whole heart that the Son of Man was gifted to heal- and that He would heal.

When Jesus enters the home of the dead girl, He comments *"The girl is not dead but asleep"* (verse 24). The crowd laughed (they knew what death was like) but Jesus took the girl by the hand and "she got up"!

Jesus was now widely known as a healer, so it's not surprising that two blind men followed him- each hoping for the gift of sight. Once again, Jesus heals- and reminds them that this healing and restoration *"according to your faith will it be done to you"* (verse 29). Jesus warned them *"See that no one knows about this"* (verse 30). I have often wondered why Jesus so many times ordered those He healed to keep quiet about their healing. It seems that two reasons are clear 1) Jesus was concerned with healing but His mission was not to "heal" but to establish the Kingdom of God; 2) the time for His confrontation with the authorities- civil and religious- not yet here so He kept a "low profile"- what I have often called a "stealth ministry". Jesus would confront the religious authorities soon enough- but had His Father's business to complete.

Yet another illness id presented to Jesus- the demon possesses man. When Jesus casts out the demon, the crowd was amazed. The Pharisees, however, were already upset, jealous and starting to slander Jesus *"It is by the Prince of demons that He drives out demons."* (verse 34).

Jesus went through "all the villages" (verse 35) and went about doing good- teaching, preaching and healing. He saw the need for fellow workers to help accomplish these important tasks and comments (then as now) *"The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few"* (verse 37). What a challenge this is to us. Jesus repeats this challenge (and gives us our marching orders) in Matthew 28- GO into all the world. Have we…will we obey His clear commands?

Genesis 29-30 January 12, 2012 Matthew 10:1-23

Jacob continues his departure and goes to the land of the "eastern peoples" (verse 1). These people were descendants of Nahor- particularly Laban- Nahor's grandson. Laban and his daughters are a key part of Jacob's future. It seems ironic that the deceiver/grasper Jacob is himself deceived by Laban, as he entices Jacob to work for seven years for Rachel and instead marries Leah. This scene is difficult to understand until you remember the middle Eastern custom of veiling the bride, and the sleeping with her after the wedding in near total darkness. Jacob awakened with the "wrong" sister..! Seven more years would pass before Jacob was entitled to the hand of Rachel. God was generous and compassionate to Leah, giving her children while the beloved Rachel was barren. God seemed to be saying to Jacob- pay attention to the rejected wife- she will be the source of the offspring I have promised you. Do we listen to God, or simply insist on our own way- and listen to what pleases us only? Leah gave birth to the four sons who were to become leaders

of tribes of Israel- Reuben ("he has seen my misery"), Simeon ("one who hears"), Levi ("attached"), and Judah ("praise")- the tribe from whom Jesus was descended.

Meanwhile Rachel bitterly laments her barrenness and complained to Jacob "Give me children or I will die" (Gen 30, verse 1). Then the pattern of "lending" servants to Jacob began- several more offspring resulted from these unions. I cannot imagine a modern woman doing this today…"Here, sleep with my maid and have children" …???

God did finally remember Rachel, and blessed her with the son Joseph. This child was to become Jacob's favorite, Jacob and Laban then became embroiled in a series of disputes- I often wonder if this is more typical than atypical for families living together- emotions can (and do) run high as each individual seeks their own way- and arguments and disputes inevitably follow. Jacob became very prosperous, and would soon see the value in leaving Laban.

Matthew 10:1-21

In Chapter 10 of Matthew's Gospel we see Jesus performing two important acts 1) calling His disciples and 2) empowering them- giving the "authority to drive out evil spirits and to heal every disease and sickness" (verse 1). I often forget that Jesus gives the same authority and power to His disciples today!

Since Jesus was called to first go to His people, He commissioned the disciples to go out but gave them these restrictions: 1) not to go among the Gentiles; 2) to avoid the Samaritans. This is not to say that Jesus (or we) should be or was uncaring about those outside our immediate group- later He spoke to the Samaritan woman, held up the virtue of the Good Samaritan, and healed and dealt with Gentiles (including the madman among the Decapolis). He is instead giving His disciples a priority- and modeling for us our need to prioritize our efforts.

The directions are misleadingly simple: preach the Kingdom of God, heal the sick, raise the dead, drive out demons. The disciples were to depend on the hospitality of those they visited- they were not to take an extra tunic or bag for the journey, or a staff. Please see the commentary at (http://www.enduringword.com/commentaries/4010.htm)

The Talmud tells us that: 'No one is to go to the Temple Mount with staff, shoes, girdle of money, or dusty feet.' The idea was that when a man entered the temple, he must make it quite clear that he had left everything which had to do with trade and business and worldly affairs behind." (Barclay)

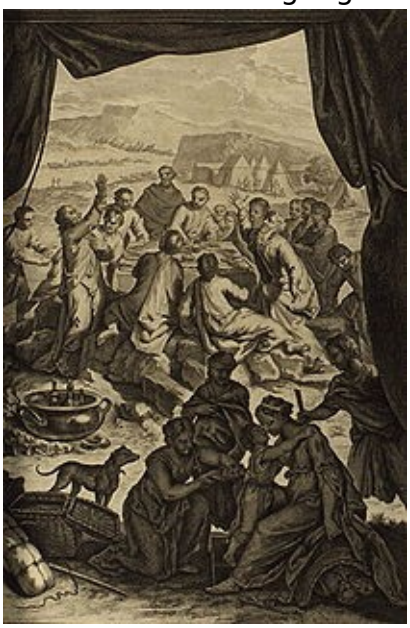
If they were welcomed in a home, they were to give it their blessing, if not they were to "shake the dust off their feet" (verse 14). They were to be on their guard, and yet be generous and kind "shrewd as snakes and innocent as doves"- impossible without the power of the Holy Spirit! They were warned that they could be arrested, but that the Spirit of the Father (the Holy Spirit) would give them the words they were to say. And so it is with us who go into the world- without any special provisions but armed only with the Power and Presence of God!

Jesus then offers stern warnings about the cost of following Him- arrest, strife within the family, the hatred of many- yet His promise is clear "he who stands firm to the end will be saved" (verse 22)- this is similar to the statement in the Revelation to John (Rev 2:3). Jesus then makes a puzzling statement "you will not finish going through the cities of Israel before the Son of Man comes" (verse 23). My guess is that this refers to Pentecost (this is on my "ask God" list).

Genesis 31-32 January 13, 2012 Matthew 10:24-42

Jacob noticed that Laban had become resentful, partly because Laban did not understand why Jacob was prospering (his flocks were strong and on the increase) while he was barely holding his own. Laban then instructs Jacob to leave, perhaps showing how much easier it is to send a problem (or problem person) away than to deal with them. Laban's daughters then ask a logical question *"Do we have any share in the inheritance of our father's estate?"* (verse 14). My best guess is that the daughters were entitled to inherit their father's estate, since there were no sons (or at least none mentioned in Scripture). While Laban is out shearing sheep, an amazing event occurs- Rachel steals the household gods (verse 19). Whether these were reminders of her childhood or objects of worship is not clear, but they (and the two daughters and children) were immediately missed on Laban's return. Laban then pursues Jacob to Gilead, and confronts him. IT's not hard to see why this would be the case, since his immediate family had left him suddenly. Laban could have harmed Jacob, but Laban had a dream in which God told him *"not to say (or do?) anything to Jacob, either good or bad"* (verses 24 and 29). We may wonder why Laban was so anxious to recover the "household gods". The best scholarship suggests that these represent not so much "idols" but incorrect objects used for worship of the true God. They may have had significant material value, and thus Rachel was "grabbing" her inheritance and getting back at her father. Rachel's deception is classic- she couldn't get up from her saddle not because of her period but because she had hidden the *"gods"* under her saddle (verse 35).

Eventually Laban and Jacob come to an agreement (a truce, or a negotiated settlement) and mark their agreement with each other- a practice that was common among God's people. Interestingly, Jacob called the pile of stones "Galeed" and Laban called it "Jagar Sahadutha" (witness heap), both with the same meaning but in two different languages- Hebrew and Aramaic, respectively



Jacob and Laban make an agreement (from Wikipedia)

The two men pledge to each other “May the God of Abraham and the God of Nahor, the God of their father, judge between us. The only qualified judge- then and now- is God Himself.

Now Jacob’s problems become even more urgent- he must deal with his estranged brother Esau. After noting that he was in “the camp of God” (verse 2) along the way to Seir- in Moab, he gave instructions that a generous gift to Esau precede them all. Jacob was terrified- his servants had gone to Esau and noted that he had with him “400 men” (verse 6). Mostly in fear Jacob asks God for assistance- he asks God to remember His promise to prosper Jacob and cause his descendants like the “sand of the sea”. I find myself in this attitude so many times- I try to bargain with God, or remind Him of His promises, while all the time seeking my will and (what I believe to be) my good.

That evening was a landmark in Jacob’s life- *“a man wrestled with him till daybreak”* (verse 24). After the person wrestling with Jacob could not overcome him, he touched Jacob’s hip and wrenched it. Despite his injury, Jacob would not let go until *“you bless me”* (verse 26). The wrestler (who many believe was God Himself), stated that Jacob would no longer ne named Jacob, but Israel “he struggles with God”. Jacob asked the Wrestler His name, but He replied *“Why do you ask my name?”*- answering a question with another question- a favorite Rabbinic method! And the Wrestler (God Himself!) blessed Jacob/Israel.

Jacob then named the place Peniel- “face of God”- because he had seen God’s face and not perished. It is so important to us that we name- and remember- the times that God has dealt with us- not just face-to-face but in so many other ways. God’s people are a remembering people!

Matthew 10:24-42

All red letters! This whole passage is the words of Jesus. As I read hem over again and again I see several key themes: 1) don’t be afraid (of men or of things hidden) ; 2) whoever acknowledges Jesus will be acknowledged by Jesus before the Father; 3) don’t expect “peace” as the world knows it when you follow Jesus; 4) Jesus must be our highest priority- more than even our family.

We are reminded to look for, can care for the “little ones” (verse 42) who are His disciples- since our kindness and caring is for Jesus Himself.

All of these are so easy to understand, so obviously and clearly truths from God, and so difficult to practice. How many times have I tried to “be a good Christian” and have forgotten the source of my power- the very Spirit of God? With God all things are possible…I MUST remember (and claim) this truth.

Genesis 33-35 January 14, 2012 Matthew 11

The women and children were to go first- yet Jacob himself “went ahead and bowed down to the ground seven times” (verse 3). S maybe Jacob did show some courage after all, despite his strange arrangement of those going to meet Esau. All turned out to be well, as the two men embraced and wept together. Perhaps enough time had gone by for Esau to deal with his feelings of being manipulated and cheated by his brother. Despite their joyful reunion, Jacob remained cautious, making his way to Succoth (”shelter”), buying the plot of ground where he pitched his tent from the sons of Hamor- father of Shechem. He then set up an altar called El Elohe Israel

(“mighty is the God of Israel”). He, as we, needed a reminder of the power and majesty- and provision- of the God he served.

The next chapter shows clearly the danger of living with the ungodly. Dinah, Jacobs daughter by Leah, was taken and sexually violated by Shechem (son of Hamor the Hivite). Hamor thought this was an opportunity to make a covenant of peace with the Israelites- after all, his son did desire Dinah! Hamor offered “peaceful coexistence” as a carrot to Jacob. Jacob’s sons conspired together and made an offer- if the sons of Hamor would become circumcised then the marriage would be acceptable. According to Scripture *“every male in the city was circumcised”* (verse 34). In the midst of their most serious post-circumcision pain, the men of the city were attacked by Simeon and Levi (presumably with their men). The sons of Jacob plundered and looted the city and took the very cattle and other livestock that the men of the city thought would be theirs! Jacob naturally worried that this act would make him and his family a target for retribution, but his sons insisted they had acted to defend the honor of their sister.

Ass so often happens, God intervenes and tells Jacob to do to Bethel and set up an altar there (Chapter 35, verse 1). Jacob was reminded of God’s faithfulness, *(“who answered me in the day of my distress and has been with me wherever I have gone”*- verse 3) and he instructed his family to rid themselves of “all the foreign gods they had and the rings in their ears” (verse 4). When God reminds us of His care,, mercy and faithfulness we are often led to do exactly this same thing- to rid ourselves of all the distractions and false “gods” that keep us out of fellowship with the true God. Notice that God protected them by putting *“the terror of God”* in the towns around Jacob so that *“no one pursued them”* (verse 5). This is the same kind of protection that God gave to Gideon when he attacked the Midianites- the battle was literally over before it began! (Judges 7)

Once again God appeared to Jacob at Bethel after he had returned from Paddan Aram, and repeated His blessing to Jacob/Israel and his descendants. (verse 12), He poured a drink offering and oil on the stone pillar, worshipping God and consecrating this place.

As Jacob then went to Ephrath, Rachel began to give birth to the last of Jacob’s sons- Benjamin. Ass happened in so many cases at that time, Rachel died in childbirth. The last son- the youngest- was then named Ben-Oni “son of my trouble” (Rachel’s name for him) but renamed Benjamin “son of my right hand”. Significantly, Rachel was then buried in what was to be later called Bethlehem!

What then follows (after a brief description of Reuben sleeping with Jacob’s concubine Bilhah), a naming of the sons- who were to become tribes:

Reuben, Simeon, Levi, Judah, Issachar and Zebulon (sons of Leah); Joseph and Benjamin (sons of Rachel); Dan and Naphtali (sons of the handmaiden Bilhah); Gad and Asher (sons of Leah’s maid Zilpah). One of my confusions about the old Testament (or more properly the Hebrew Scriptures) is the identity of the 12 tribes. Later in Genesis, Joseph has two sons- Manasseh and Ephriam) which are blessed by Jacob and are later listed as tribe names. Someday I will resolve this confusion.

Jacob then returns “home” to Mamre, where his father, Isaac, dies at age 180. Both Issac’s sone- Essau and Jacob- buried him. Grief truly unites families, often causing old resentments and fears to be forgotten or forgiven. Seems that was the case here.

Matthew 11

Jesus was preaching and teaching in the towns of Galilee, and John's disciples came and asked him "Are you the One?". John was imprisoned by Herod, soon to die, and was naturally curious of this One whom he had baptized was the Messiah. It is not clear, especially to me, if the voice of God Himself at Jesus' baptism had been heard by John. In Matthew 3 we read *"And a voice from heaven said, this is my Son, whom I love, in Him am I pleased"* (verse17). My guess is that John heard the voice of God, since the text suggests that God intended that those present clearly understand that this was His Son,

Jesus' reply is telling- *"Go back and report to John what you hear and see"* (verse 4). The reality- that which we see and hear- is superior to our opinion or ideas. Jesus clearly established His credentials in His healing and teaching ministries. Jesus then turns to the crowd and asks them (maybe with some frustration) "To what can I compare this generation?" (verse 16). The crowds criticized Jesus for being a "glutton" and were convinced that John who "neither eating or drinking" had a demon. Nothing would truly satisfy them. We all do this to some degree- Jesus is "our Jesus"- He wouldn't act this way or that way (that disagrees with what WE think)- He is made into an extension of what WE believe or want Him to be- and we miss the power, the greatness, the holiness of God. We make our God an extension of ourselves, and fail to love, worship and obey the awesome Creator of the universe.

The cities in which Jesus performed so many miracles did not repent, and prompted Jesus to proclaim *"Woe to you. Korazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida!"* (verse 21). The city to which Job preached- Ninevah- did repent. Jesus states that if the miracles performed in these two cities had been performed in Sodom, the city would have been spared. How easy it is for us to ignore those with whom we are "familiar". You can only imagine the thoughts and feelings of James, Jesus' brother- Could my brother (Jesus) really be the Messiah? James did, however, discover the truth and was an example of a true prayer warrior.

Comfort as well as warning- these always come from our Lord- warning as to the dire consequences of our wrong choices, and comfort to us who are striving to serve God and overcome the temptations and assault of the world around us. Jesus DOES understand. Jesus will give us "rest"- hallelujah!- what a blessing and a comfort! His yoke is "easy" and His burden "light" (verse 30).

Genesis 36-37 January 15, 2012 Matthew 12:1-21

So Esau settles in Seir- there were not enough resources to support the livestock of both him and his brother Jacob. Notably, Esau is described in Scripture as the "father of the Edomites".

Genesis 37 begins the saga of Joseph- beginning with the twin dreams- one in which the shocks of wheat bowed down to him and the second the sun moon and eleven starts bowed to him. As is not unexpected, his brothers grew more and more jealous of him. Such a reminder to me as I bemoan my "dysfunctional family"- the same issues and problems were present then as now! So in a fateful decision Jacob sends his son Joseph to Shechem where his older brothers have taken the flocks to graze. Joseph found his brothers at Dothan (not Alabama!)- I often wonder how long

and hard a journey that would be for a young boy…did he have every confidence as he traveled that God was with him…had he traveled such distances alone before? *"Here comes the dreamer"* they said (verse 19). They certainly remembered and resented what Joseph had recounted about the two dreams- and their rage and resentment reached its climax as they took the next step to remove this "dreamer" from themselves. I have always admired Reuben- he stood up to his brothers and planned to come back and rescue his brother and return him to their father. In verse 25, the opportunity to sell Joseph is presented. Some who would discredit the inerrancy of Scripture point to the two different descriptions of the traders (Ishmaelites- verse 25, and Midianite traders-verse 28) as evidence for error in Scripture. Why is it not reasonable to have both descriptions be true? In fact, most conservative scholars are in agreement that these two terms are synonymous (http://www.tektonics.org/lp/midish.html). Apparently Reuben did not know of this sale of Joseph, so that when he returned he looked for Joseph in the cistern but did not find him- and tore his clothes in sorrow and anguish! The deception continues as the brothers took Joseph's beautiful robe- symbol of his father's love- and dipped it in blood to deceiver their father- *"he was torn to pieces by a wild animal"* they were to report (verse 33).

When Jacob heard the story, he tore HIS clothes and was inconsolable. His precious son was gone…meanwhile the hand of God is working to place Joseph in the service of the captain of the guard of Pharaoh's troops in Egypt.

Matthew 12:1-21

Jesus is Lord of the Sabbath! The Sabbath was created for man, not man for the Sabbath! (Mark 2:27) The critics of Jesus were eager to find ways to discredit Him and cause Him to seem like a "lawbreaker". Yet they (and so many of us) miss the point. The Sabbath was a gift to restore us physically and spiritually, not a burden to be borne. So then Jesus healed- even on the Sabbath. So offended were the Pharisees that they *"plotted how they might kill Jesus" (*verse 14). It is important to note that Jesus was "aware of this" (verse 15)- He knew what his enemies were like- and He knew He must be careful in His healing and teaching to avoid too many open confrontations with them- His time was already short- no need to shorten it further! This was all to fulfill what the Prophet Isaiah had proclaimed centuries earlier: (Isaiah 42:1-2)

18 "Here is my servant whom I have chosen,
the one I love, in whom I delight;
I will put my Spirit on him,
and he will proclaim justice to the nations.
19 He will not quarrel or cry out;
no one will hear his voice in the streets.
20 A bruised reed he will not break,
and a smoldering wick he will not snuff out,
till he has brought justice through to victory.
21 In his name the nations will put their hope."

Genesis 38-40 January 16, 2014 Matthew 12:22-50 (transition)

The daughter of Shua…the "nameless" wife of Judah- was a Caananite. By Judah's marriage to this Caananite woman, tragedy and heartbreak occur. This should be no surprise to us, since disobedience results in negative consequences- some immediate, some that come later- but that always occur! Er, the firstborn from Judah and the Caananite wife, died because of *"wickedness"* (Genesis 38:7). Their daughter, Tamar, who did not wait for her new promised husband, Shelah, to grow up- assumed the garb of a prostitute and slept with her father in law Judah. The outcome of this forbidden relationship were the twin sons Perez and Zerah (Perez=breaking out; Zerah= scarlet or "brightness").

In Chapter 39 we rejoin Joseph- now "taken down" to Egypt by his slave owner captors. He receives favorable recognition from a high Egyptian official- Potiphar, and assumes management of Potiphar's home and possessions. As happens so often, God *"blessed the household of the Egyptian because of Joseph"* (Gen 39:5). Potiphar's only concern was "the food he ate" (Gen 39:6) which is probably a reference to his occupation in earning his daily bread. But the sin of lust- Potiphar's wife for the handsome young Hebrew- led to the accusation against Joseph that he had forced himself on Potiphar's wife. In this "soap opera" type scenario, the frustrated and rejected woman exacts her revenge against the man who rejected her. Joseph is unjustly imprisoned- but even there he prospers because *"the Lord was with Joseph"* (Gen 39:23). God made no mistake in choosing Joseph to accomplish great things- his character and faithfulness were a constant reality- and were a catalyst in God's accomplishing great things through him. Would that I had Joseph's faith and constant obedience!

The account of Joseph in jail should not surprise us…anywhere Joseph went he received blessings from God- a wonderful result of obedience and faithfulness. Sometimes I fail to see my blessings, but the obstacle is my own bad attitudes or feelings of entitlement. The fact that the cupbearer *"did not remember Joseph"* (Gen 40:23) did not diminish God's presence or gracious purpose- we cannot diminish God (or His intentions) by our own carelessness or ingratitude.

Matthew 12:22-50

Healing by the power of Satan? Surely not…yet that is exactly what Jesus was accused of. Jesus' reply about a "house divided" (Matt 12:25) was used by president Abraham Lincoln to express his deep concern about a divided union. As always, the logic and force of pure truth from Jesus could not be avoided or overcome. We receive a strong warning in Jesus' words that *"Whoever is not with me is against me…"* (Matt 12:30)- and also that our words and actions DO count (verses 36-37).

At several points during His ministry, Jesus spoke prophetically about His earthly fate- here he predicts that His death, burial and resurrection will be a "sign of the prophet Jonah" (Matt 12:39).

In verses 37 and 38 He teaches us what REAL family is…not the nuclear family bound by blood or DNA, but the family bound by God's Spirit- all over the earth we find family everywhere. This is certainly a cause for great rejoicing!

Genesis 41 January 17, 2014 Matthew 13:1-32

Dreams are but one of the ways that God (and God's Holy Spirit) communicate to us. The Pharaoh experienced a series of unsettling dreams, so he naturally

consulted those in the “spiritual realm” to help interpret it. He sent for the *“magicians and wise men”* (Gen 41:8) for help, but no one could interpret his two dreams. As God had given the dream, it required God’s man- Joseph- to give the correct interpretation. Notice that Joseph gives God all the credit for the interpretation- Joseph sees himself as only the conduit or messenger- true humility and a great witness to our God and His wisdom and goodness! (Gen 41:16). The two dreams are explained- as two versions of the same message (verses 25-17). Seven years of plenty are to be followed by seven years of famine. The Pharaoh immediately seizes the opportunity to put God’s person in charge of managing the plenty and the famine. This is a clear evidence of the impact of Joseph’s witness to his God. Only a godly person would have the wisdom and skill to do the management of the critical resource of food in the best manner. All this happened when Joseph was only 30- young in years but experienced and wise beyond his earthly years.

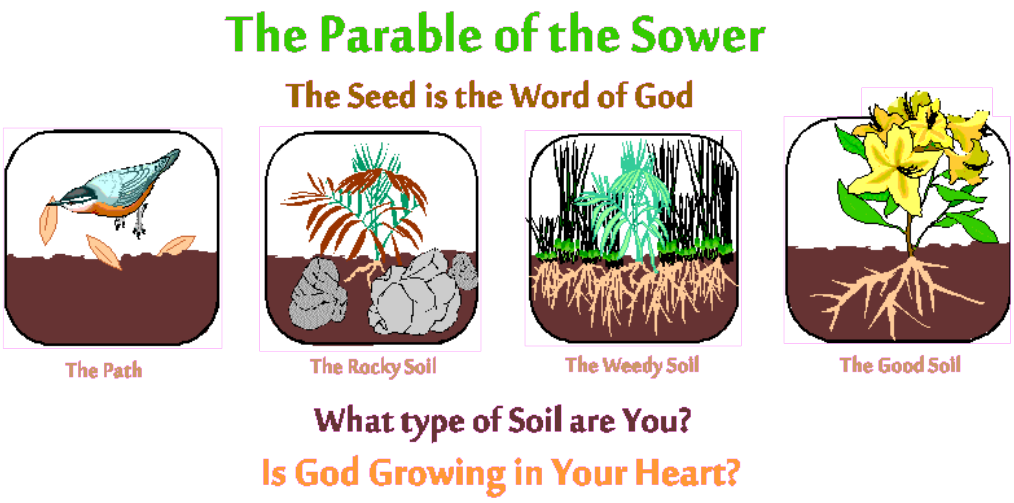
Matthew 13:1-32

Three parables- the sower, the weeds, and mustard seed and yeast- all to explain to the people who followed Jesus and heard His words great truths about the Kingdom of God. Jesus so often used images that every person could understand, and gave each story many layers of meaning. The simplest and the wisest can (and are!) blessed with these stories of God’s truth. How is the Kingdom built? How do we handle evil among God’s people? How do we learn to grow in a way that glorifies God? These are questions worth a careful and thoughtful answer- which our loving God graciously supplied!

Every time I hear the parable of the sower I pray that I will be one of the disciples likened to fertile ground, and that I would be *“the one who produces a crop, yielding a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown.”* (Matt 13:23).

The issue of evil among God’s people as illustrated by the parable of the weeds is a truly difficult one. Our tendency is to “root out” the “weeds” or deny them entry into our fellowship. We are told, however, to WAIT until the harvest in which time God will sort each one out. The ultimate fate of the weeds is the furnace, but God is the “sorter”. So many times those we reject or judge- the “sinners” need to be in our fellowship so that God’s Word can be heard by them and the Holy Spirit change their hearts into the persons God wishes them to be and created them to be.

I can never read the parable of the mustard seed without thinking of the mustard seed necklace my Mother wore so often. The tiny seed becomes a large bush- that which seems small and insignificant- and powerless- becomes a source of nurture and strength. So it is that God's Spirit grows within us. It is small at first but then grows and changes all around it.



Genesis 42,43 January 18, 2014 Matthew 13:33-58

Famine in the land! Just as God had showed Pharaoh in his dreams, the seven years of plenty were followed hard by seven years of famine. Jacob, not wanting to starve any more than anyone else, sent his sons- except for Benjamin- to Egypt to purchase grain. The brothers reach Egypt, and seek out the governor of the land. Here begins one of the most touching stories of reconciliation in all of the Bible. Joseph- now dressed and speaking as an Egyptian official-recognizes his brothers, but understandable they do not recognize him.

Joseph decides to stay unrevealed, and has the silver his brothers brought to pay for grain returned to their grain sacks. Joseph ordered them to bring back the youngest son- the one he had never seen- to him and prove their "honesty". Guilt strikes them (verses 25-26) as they remember the harm they did to Joseph, and they begin to feel the consequences of their betrayal…if only we had not done this! So many of us find this to be our position with each other and with God…if only…..!

The grain they brought runs out, and now Joseph and his family must face the demands of the Egyptian governor- bring back the youngest to get access to more life-saving grain! Finally Judah pledges to protect the youngest son- his youngest brother Benjamin. Naturally, they feared being accused of robbery since their silver was returned- yet Joseph's steward tells them that *"Your God, the God of your father, has given you treasure in your sacks; I received your silver."* (Gen 43:23).

Joseph weeps (privately) at the sight of Benjamin, and serves his youngest brother a portion *"five times as much as anyone else's"* (Gen 43:34). It is interesting to note that all the Hebrews ate separately from the Egyptians- the Scripture explains this by saying the Egyptians "despised" the Hebrews. We will see more of this later (Exodus 1) during the enslavement of the Hebrews well after Joseph's time. The Hebrews were once friends but in a matter of years became detested enemies of the Egyptians.

Matthew 13:33-58

Jesus completes the teaching he has started. He describes the meanings of the parables of the weed and yeast, and tells two more parables/stories about the hidden treasure in a field, the pearl of great value (KJV great price) and the net. All of these stories gave new meaning to familiar things- and were masterfully used by Jesus to illustrate and communicate the Kingdom of God.

Alluding to the "new" things He is teaching, Jesus makes a remarkable statement "…every teacher of the law who has become a disciple in the kingdom of heaven is like the owner of a house who brings out of his storeroom new treasures as well as old." (Matt 13:52). It seems clear that Jesus believes that the "teachers of the Law" can indeed become disciples- and it is likely that some did! These teachers would then have "old treasures"- the Scriptures that they loved, memorized and studies, as well as "new treasures" that they received from Jesus.

The chapter of Matthew's Gospel ends with a poignant note. Jesus reflects on the lack of miracles in his home town and attributes this to the lack of faith of those who "knew" Him so well. The Gospel account says those who knew Him as a "home town" person "took offense at Him" (Matt 13:57). They simply could not reconcile this One they knew with their image of the Savior, the Healer, the very Son of God. God does NOT force us to have faith, but He blesses us tremendously when we live it.

Genesis 44,45 January 19, 2014 Matthew 14:1-21

More trickery and deception. For those who believe the Scripture is not an accurate representation of real people in real situations, this story alone should stand as a powerful counter example. Joseph is not through with his manipulation (and dare I say it, "getting even") of his brothers. This time only Benjamin's grain sack is tampered with and the silver money brought to pay for grain as well as Josephs own silver cup is placed in it. After accusing all the brothers of thievery, I wonder what went through Joseph's mind when his *brothers "threw themselves to the ground before him"* (Gen 44:14). Perhaps he was thinking of his boyhood dream when he saw his brothers bow before him….and yet he chooses to show mercy instead of judgment. Judah, in an act of mercy and courage, volunteers to take Benjamin's place so Jacob will not feel the grief of a lost son twice.

Finally Joseph is overcome, and reveals himself to his brothers. I have wondered if God ever is "overcome" with grief over us- as we disobey, ignore, and trample that which is precious to Him- and that which should be precious to us. I believe from my years of experience in "wrestling with God" that he does grieve- sometimes especially for me..!

Joseph reveals himself, and more importantly reveal's God's very purpose- to bring victory and life out of tragedy, defeat and death. Joseph says it clearly *"…But God sent me ahead of you to preserve for you a remnant on earth and to save your lives by a great deliverance."* (Gen 45:7). Joseph's sale into slavery, his trials in Egypt, and his ultimate elevation to manager of the grain of all Egypt, were all in God's plan!

When Jacob/Israel hears this wonderful news- he then has hope- a hope he had probably abandoned completely- to see his lost son again before Jacob died. So God is, after all, a God of second chances!

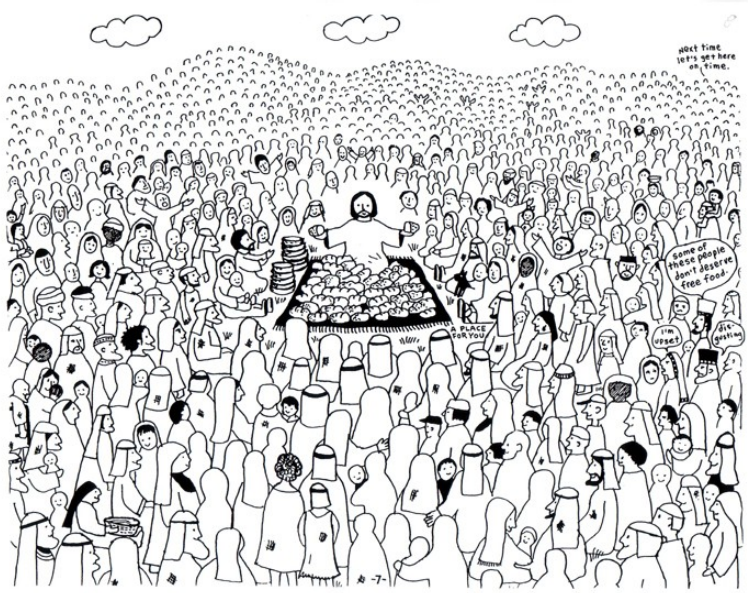
Matthew 14:1-21

Herod enters the narrative, and on hearing about Jesus and his teaching and baptizing ministry, believes John the Baptist has risen from the dead! John had criticized Herod and told him that he could not "have" his brother Phillip's wife, Herodias (Matt 14:4). So Herod had John the Baptists put in jail. After Herodias danced for Herod's dinner guests. Herod declared he would give her *"whatever she asked"* (Matt 4:7). Unfortunately for John, Herodias's mother had planned to eliminate John and had her daughter ask for John's head on a platter. Not wanting to lose face before his dinner guests, Herod ordered John beheaded and complied with this grisly wish. John's disciples heard this awful news, buried John and told Jesus what had happened.

We see Jesus' grief and humanity clearly in verse 13- Jesus *"withdrew by boat privately to a solitary place"* (Matt 14:13). However, when Jesus realized that a crowd had gathered on the news of His presence, He " landed and saw a large crowd, he had compassion on them and healed their sick." (Matt 14:14). Unlike myself, Jesus did not demand time to grieve or heal His emotional wounds- when he saw God calling Him to minister- he responded immediately and with a full and devoted servant's heart.

Then evening comes. We would assume Jesus had been ministering to the crowd all day. The time for the evening meal had come, and they were in a "remote place". The disciples' answer to the problem was simple, direct and wrong- just send them away to buy food. Jesus, however, does not give His disciples that option. His reply is a command (Matt 14:16) *"They do not need to go away. You give them something to eat."*

The disciples have an answer (excuse)…we only have five loaves of bread and two fish. Yet Jesus takes command of this situation, and out of their little generates an exceptional abundance…all 5000 (men), as well as women and children are fed. Twelve basketfuls of "scrap pieces" were left over! Praise God who is able to provide beyond what we "ask or imagine" (Eph 3:20)!



Genesis 46-48 January 20th, 2014 Matthew 14:22-36

Sixty six persons traveled to Egypt, which then gathered with Joseph, his wife and two sons, made seventy in all of Jacob/Israel's family. These family members were the source of what would be a nation great not only in numbers but in influence in Egypt. Later, the pharaohs who "did not know Joseph" would fear and despise the Hebrews, who had their geographic origin in Goshen- west of the main Egyptian population centers near the Nile. This was originally due to the Egyptian prejudice against shepherds- as described in Scripture "all shepherds are detestable to the Egyptians." (Gen 46:34). This may have been because shepherds are typically nomads, or because the Hebrews sacrificed animals that the Egyptians held as sacred. It may simply be "distrust of foreigners". Whatever the reason, the presence of what was to be a huge population of Hebrews eventually was regarded as a threat.

Genesis 47 contains one of my very favorite passages in this story. Jacob/Israel is asked by the pharaoh how old he is and Jacob's reply is *"The years of my pilgrimage are a hundred and thirty."* (Gen 47:9). Life is truly a pilgrimage, a journey, a passageway into eternity. My daily prayer is that I will be fully engaged in each day and enjoy both the surprises and the "routine", and accept that which comes my way with peace and purpose.

Even though the seven year famine was prepared for and anticipated, it became so severe that the Egyptians exhausted their money, then their livestock, and finally their own personal freedom just to stay alive. One fifth of the land, however, was reserved for the Egyptian priests, as well as one fifth of the produce of the land. This is similar to the arrangement set up by God for his priests- the Levites- who received some of the food offered in sacrifice.

When Jacob become 147 years old, he realized his time had come to leave this earth. His request- to swear that he not be buried in Egypt, is a symbol of the eventual return to the Promised Land. God's people did not belong in Egypt but for a while, their real home was (and is) elsewhere.

The blessing of Joseph's sons by Jacob is a particularly touching and meaningful scene to me. I have wasted much time wishing my father had given me his blessing- the approval that so many children seek but don't receive. Dad would tell other folks he was "proud of me" but almost never told me the same thing. Jacob's blessing is also significant in that the first born was blessed after the second born. This is exactly what Jacob himself accomplished through deceit, but in this case I believe God showing by example that His plans and procedures are superior to ours. "How dare God bless the send born instead of the first?"…and yet He did and for His reasons. God revealed to Jacob that the younger would be greater than the older (Gen48:19).

Matthew 14:22-36

Walking on water….? Why would Jesus do this? So many have puzzled and pondered this sign or miracle. Certainly Jesus had no need to draw attention to Himself- He was well known by so many and the number who knew Him- or loved and served Him- grew over the short three years of His earthly ministry. Was it to demonstrate that he was God…that He was not limited by the usual physical laws of the universe? We may never know…!

After Jesus tells them to not "be afraid", He invites Simon Peter to join Him. Amazingly, Peter is able to walk on the water toward Jesus. When he "sees the wind" (my guess is Peter saw the wind on the water) he loses his focus on Jesus and begins to sink. Jesus' words to him are telling *"You of little faith," he said, "why did you doubt?"* (Matt 14:31). So many times when I lose my focus, especially my focus on the Lord, I "sink" as well!

Notice that Jesus accepts worship from those in the boat (Matt 14:33), signifying His knowledge of equality with God His Father. When Jesus and the disciples land, they again draw a crowd of those who need help and healing, and some are healed simply by touching His cloak (verse 36). The issue is always faith…the faith that heals, the faith that gives power, courage, strength and peace.

Genesis 49-50 January 21st, 2014 Matthew 15:1-20

What's in a name…? As Jacob/Israel gathers his sons around him he prophesies what is to become of each one. Reuben- a favorable description "strong" followed by a judgment- you went into my bed and "defiled it" (Gen 49:4). Simeon and Levi- also described as having "violence" (Gen 49:5)- yet Levi was to be the ancestor of the priestly order! Judah (Gen 49:8-12) gets perhaps the most favorable prophesy- for out of his line will come Jesus. Judah had committed sexual sin by sleeping with and impregnating Tamar- and yet he had asked forgiveness and his sin was not held against him. Joseph (Gen 49:22-26) has perhaps the next most favorable prophesy. Note how God is clearly given the credit for the good that is in Joseph and in the obedient and courageous acts he is to perform!

And then (Gen 49:29-33) Jacob dies and requests to be buried with Isaac and Abraham, an acknowledgement that they are but temporary residents in Egypt. Their true home is elsewhere!

So Jacob dies and is embalmed- according to the Egyptian custom, and Joseph and an entourage go to an area near Jordan to a threshing floor and weep loudly for the patriarch. The mourning was such an event that the local folks remarked *"The Egyptians are holding a solemn ceremony of mourning."* (Gen 50:11) and call the place of mourning "Abel Mizraim", which means "mourning of the Egyptians". The ultimate place of burial is "the field of Machpelah, near Mamre, which Abraham had bought along with the field as a burial place from Ephron the Hittite." (Gen 50:13).

After their father is gone, Joseph's brothers begin to fear that Joseph may still have retribution on his heart- which he might have kept hidden during Jacob's days on the earth. Joseph's reassurance and forgiveness of his brothers is a model of forgiveness to us…and a great tribute to the power and sovereignty of God. *"Don't be afraid. Am I in the place of God? You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives. So then, don't be afraid. I will provide for you and your children." And he reassured them and spoke kindly to them."* (Gen 50:19-21).

The death of Joseph marks the end of this first book of Scripture- the "book of beginnings". God is still holding to His plan to take His people to the land He promised them (Gen 50:24). The deliverance was to take approximately 400 years.

Matthew 15:1-20

Can we eat what we wish? Is the Old Testament law about clean and unclean animals, ritual cleansing before eating and other rules still binding? Or do we enjoy the freedom that is in Christ? These issues were "hot button" issues with the experts in the law in Jesus' time. Jesus' disciples were accused of being lawbreakers for not following the rules of ritual cleaning before eating, but Jesus made a counterclaim to an issue far more serious- the Pharisees' tradition of dedicating certain things to God ("corban") and denying them to their parents who needed them is challenged. We face so many similar issues- we are "blind" to our own sin, but are acutely aware of the sin in others. We conveniently separate sin into "small sins" (which we admit that we sometimes commit) and "really bad" sins which others commit.

Jesus quotes Isaiah 29 in describing these "experts":

"'These people honor me with their lips,

but their hearts are far from me.
They worship me in vain;
their teachings are merely human rules.'"(Isaiah 29:13, Matthew 15:8-9)

Jesus explains that it is not what is outside of us that causes us to sin, but the heart itself! I am certain that His description of these "experts" as "blind guides" (Matt 15:14) did not endear Him with the religious leaders.

Exodus 1-3 January 22nd, 2014 Matthew 15:21-39

Seventy Hebrews become a "multitude". Even though they were in a region west of most Egyptians, many of the Egyptian hosts became worried or suspicious, or both- of their Hebrew co-occupants. As is the case in so many people, paranoia and fear lead to negative action- the Hebrew people were enslaved to "control" them. (Ex 1:11). The plan backfired- the more the Hebrew people were oppressed, the more they multiplied! The Egyptian response was that they"…made their lives bitter with harsh labor in brick and mortar and with all kinds of work in the fields; in all their harsh labor the Egyptians worked them ruthlessly." (Ex 1:14).

The Pharaoh was so desperate to control the seemingly limitless population growth of the Hebrews that he ordered his midwives to kill all the male children, or later, to throw them into the Nile. And then, a "fine child" (Ex 2:2) was born to a Levite couple who was to change the course of his people's history forever. The baby is placed in a basket and put into the shore of the river, with an older sister watching closely to see what will happen…and then the kindness of the Pharaoh's daughter results in his rescue and residence with the royal family…he is "Moses" (which sounds like the Hebrew "draw out") who was literally drawn out of the water. Moses' real mother was even paid to nurse him!

As a young man, Moses witnessed an Egyptian beating one of his own Hebrew people. He must have known- or been taught- that he was a Hebrew, or else his identification with the oppressed would not have been as compelling..! Looking *"this way and that"* (Ex 2:12) he saw no one looking and then killed the Egyptian. When Moses discovers later that this murder is not a secret, he flees from Pharaoh to Midian. There he meets and marries his first wife and has a son "Gershom" (the name sounds like Hebrew for "a foreigner there").

And then the stage is set- the Pharaoh dies, the Hebrew people cry out, and God "… heard their groaning and he remembered his covenant with Abraham, with Isaac and with Jacob." (Ex 2:24). Of course, God had never forgotten His covenant, but from the point of view of the human beings that He created, it seemed so. Our time scale is so limited- we only see today and tomorrow- rarely any further and wonder "Where is God…?". Yet He is the God who is WITH us, as He is soon to reveal to Moses.

Moses was busy tending his flock, probably having abandoned any thoughts of returning to Egypt and his own people, when a wonderful and surprising thing happens. God speaks to him- directly- through a "burning bush". Many have speculated as to the exact nature of this bush, or tried to provide a :scientific explanation" for what occurred. What we need to remember, though, is that God was PRESENT and that He spoke directly to His chosen leader. A dialog follows that is a wonderful (and frightening) picture of human nature and our inability (or unwillingness) to obediently follow God. God's words are: *"So now, go. I am sending*

you to Pharaoh to bring my people the Israelites out of Egypt." And then Moses' reply is: "Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?". God speaks again: "I will be with you. And this will be the sign to you that it is I who have sent you: When you have brought the people out of Egypt, you will worship God on this mountain." (Ex 3:10-12).

Moses continues to look for excuses for his unwillingness to follow God's clear direction..."Who shall I say sent me..?" Moses is seemingly asking for credentials, for authority, but is actually seeking a way out. He has probably become comfortable living away from his own people and the murder charge that still may be awaiting him. But God has a plan, as He always does!

"The elders of Israel will listen to you" and even *"I will make the Egyptians favorable disposed..."* (Ex 3:18,21). Not only will Moses' people accept his leadership, but God will move not only in the heart of Pharaoh (which will require a "mighty hand" (Ex 3:19)), but in the Egyptian people- who will provide the gold and silver for the Temple. God will provide!

Matthew 15:21-39

Two stories of a sick women, described as a Cannanite (Matt 15:22) and a Syrophonecian woman (Mark 7:25), provide an account which clearly shows Jesus' compassion for those not in the "family" of the Jewish people. In Matthew's account the woman addresses Jesus as "Son of David" (Matt 15:22), and begs Him to free her daughter from a demonic spirit. In an exchange with Jesus, the woman shows her spirit and humor in arguing that even the Gentile "dogs" deserve the crumbs under their master's table. Jesus, likely impressed with her spirit and certainly her faith, pronounces the healing- based on her faith. Earlier we have noted that Jesus was limited in His own home town, not because of any lack of power but by the lack of faith of those around Him. A gift, to be a gift, must be received!

Another miraculous story follows this account. As in a previous instance (Matthew 14) a crowd has listened to Jesus teaching and now the time has come to feed the vast number of people (4000 men in this case, 5000 in the Matthew 14 account). Here, seven loaves and a "few" fish are converted to food for the thousands gathered. Jesus truly is the "bread of life" (John 6:35).

Exodus 4-6 January 23, 2014 Matthew 16

A staff or a snake? God can change one to the other- and back! This was just one of the "credentials" given to Moses to convince the Pharaoh that God was behind the need to lift the bondage of slavery on the Hebrew people, and let them go to the land He had promised them. Leprosy that appeared and disappeared, and the ability to turn water into blood- also given to God's chosen servant. And yet Moses, like us, sometimes seeks to avoid God's calling. Moses stated that he had *"never been eloquent"* (Ex 4:10), which was certainly something God would know. The logic is inescapable, but the call of God was also real. God clearly states that He was the Creator of all- and that "all" included Moses. Then Moses plainly states "send someone else" (Ex 4:13). Now God is truly angry (and as I might guess, sad and disappointed as well), but replies that Aaron- Moses' brother- was gifted in speaking and could speak for Moses. So goes God's call to obedience for many of us- we think of any and all excuses to avoid God's call instead of joyously and energetically following Him!

Moses then tells his father in law Jethro (one of my favorite Bible names!) that he is returning to Egypt (Ex 4:18). Those who would have remembered Moses murder, or seek revenge against him, are now dead (Ex 4:19). God's commands to Moses on his return to Egypt are clear (Ex 4:2—23)- to perform "signs and wonders" in front of the Pharaoh (also referred to as the "king" elsewhere in Exodus). There is a hint of Moses' final action- that of killing the firstborn (Ex 4:23) which will be the final act that convinces Pharaoh to let the Hebrew people go free.

On the way to accomplishing the mission that God has put him on, God threatens to kill Moses. This always has been surprising to me, until I remember that God's requirements for circumcision were very important- this was the mark of the people that God had chosen- and Moses had forgotten to circumcise Zipporah's son! Then (Ex4:27-30) God sends Aaron to the "desert" to meet with Moses and plan their meeting with Pharaoh. Moses' "signs and wonders" are sufficient to convince the Hebrew elders that he is sent from God, and they worship God in gratitude for His hearing their pleas.

The first audience with Pharaoh goes very poorly- the result is harder labor for the Hebrews- they are now required to gather straw for their own bricks rather that have it provided. In fact, the people Moses is supposed to lead are now convinced that Moses has brought them more trouble, not less (Ex 5:21).

Now God has Moses right where He wants him…confused, discouraged and fearful. Much later Paul writes *"For the foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than human strength."* (1 Cor 1:25). God is ready to show His strength, power, and control over humans and human history! He proclaims to Moses: *"Because of my mighty hand he will let them go; because of my mighty hand he will drive them out of his country."* (Ex 6:1) and *'I am the Lord, and I will bring you out from under the yoke of the Egyptians. I will free you from being slaves to them, and I will redeem you with an outstretched arm and with mighty acts of judgment. I will take you as my own people, and I will be your God. Then you will know that I am the Lord your God, who brought you out from under the yoke of the Egyptians. And I will bring you to the land I swore with uplifted hand to give to Abraham, to Isaac and to Jacob. I will give it to you as a possession. I am the Lord.'"* (Ex 6:6). And yet the people do not hear or believe God because *"of their discouragement and harsh labor."* (Ex 6:9).

What follows is a listing of the lines of descent of the tribe/clan or Reuben and Levi. I often have wondered why Scripture- especially the Hebrew Scriptures_ place so much emphasis on lines of descent. One clear answer is that God's people were committed (and commanded!) to keep their lines of descent free from those outside God's covenant- they were to marry other Hebrews! The chapter ends with Moses bemoaning his inability to speak convincingly to Pharaoh. When God again commands Moses ""I am the Lord. Tell Pharaoh king of Egypt everything I tell you." (Ex 6:29), Moses replies:" "Since I speak with faltering lips, why would Pharaoh listen to me?" (Ex 6:30). How hard it must be for God to listen to our constant whining and excuses!

Matthew 16

Why did the Pharisees (and other "experts in the Law") wish to test Jesus? MY opinion is that they wanted to avoid giving Him credibility and authority. If He had this authority, then they would be compelled by their love and respect for God (and His Son) to follow Him, and give up their own exalted position and status. So instead of following Him, the questioned and tested Him! Thus the tests. Jesus, knowing their hearts, said that they would receive no sign except that of Jonah. Jesus implied, it would seem, that He would be buried in the earth and then rise- much as Jonah was "buried" in the belly of a great fish, and then was released onto the land.

On a subsequent journey across the lake with His disciples, Jesus warned them to *"Be careful," Jesus said to them. "Be on your guard against the yeast of the Pharisees and Sadducees."* (Matt 16:6). The disciples, taking the word "yeast" literally, thought Jesus was talking about bread! He corrected them, and repeated His warning about the teachings and practices of the religious leaders- to beware of their "yeast" or "leaven" (Matt 16:12).

Jesus then asks a question- perhaps one of the most important questions that can be asked- *"Who do people say the Son of Man is?"* (Matt 16:13). This question is not really about Jesus' popularity, but a leading question into the real issue- what do the disciples think…! Jesus has by now spent enough time with them that even the slowest would have been able to absorb the magnitude of Jesus' power, healing, teaching and miracle-working that were God's clear credentials to His Sonship. God does, however, reveal that which is important for us to understand. Jesus attributes Peter's declaration *"You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God."* (Matt 16:16) with revelation from God and not flesh and blood. Peter saw- and was given faith to see more, and to see the important things!

In a passage of Scripture that has been hotly debated through the ages, Jesus declares *"you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven."* (Matt 16:18-19). The Roman Catholic tradition is that the "rock" was Peter himself, therefore making him the first of a line of popes. The Protestant tradition is that the "rock" is Peter's faith- the faith by which we are all justified. Then Jesus orders the disciples not to tell "anyone" that he is the Messiah. Why would Jesus command such a thing? Surely He would welcome acknowledgement of His unique being and relationship with God? My best answer

is that it was not yet time…much later to the Samaritan woman, and in the court of the high priest during His "trial" He would clearly state who He was (and is!). God's timing is always perfect!

Jesus then explains to the disciples what must happen to Him…his arrest, trial and ultimate death at the hands of the authorities- but then *"…on the third day be raised to life."* (Matt 16:21). As is the case so many times, the disciples either reject the prospect outright, or refuse to process or understand it. The same Peter whose faith was commended just a while earlier now shows his humanity and rejection of God's perfect plan: ""Never, Lord!" he said. "This shall never happen to you!" (Matt 16:22). Jesus then rebukes him by saying:" "Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; you do not have in mind the concerns of God, but merely human concerns." (Matt 16:23). Jesus tries to make clear to His disciples that a life with Him is a life of servanthood and obedience, of daily taking up "their cross". The chapter ends as Jesus states that *"… some who are standing here will not taste death before they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom."* (Matt 16:28). This statement has been a source of confusion and controversy. Some of the early church took Jesus' remark to mean He was coming "soon" as the King of Israel and the Lion of Judah. Critics of the authority of Scripture sometimes cite this as an error, or as a sign that Jesus was delusional or simply misled or in error. My understanding is that Jesus is referring to His return after the crucifixion, in which He initiated the Kingdom of God at Pentecost in the giving of the Holy Spirit. I will be certain to ask Jesus about that when I see Him!

Exodus 7-8 January 24th, 2014 Matthew 17

Be obedient and *"…say everything I command you"* (Ex 7:2) and wonderful things will happen. God promised Moses that Pharaoh would see him "as a god" and Aaron "as his prophet". And God promised what seemed impossible- that Pharaoh would release the teeming millions of Hebrew slaves to go to their Promised Land! And this time. *"Moses and Aaron did just as the Lord commanded them."*(Ex 7:6). Just to make the point of God's power (and our weakness) even more evident. Moses was 80 and Aaron 83 at this time...a time when many of us in this era are slowing to a crawl!

So Moses shows Pharaoh a first credential- his staff is thrown down and becomes a snake...the Egyptians counterfeit this with their magic arts, but the Moses' staff/snake eats the Egyptian snakes. So often the evil one counterfeits the truth, and yet the truth is always more powerful! Just as the Lord had said, Pharaoh's heart became hard and he would not listen to Moses.

The plagues follow in sequence- first blood- threatening the very heart of Egyptian agriculture- the Nile. Pharaoh's heart became hard and they dug for water underground. Then frogs- everywhere, and Pharaoh still would not listen. Next gnats and then flies, and Pharaoh at first seems to soften his stance and suggests at first:*"…Go, sacrifice to your God here in the land."*(Ex 8:25). And later he suggests *"I will let you go to offer sacrifices to the Lord your God in the wilderness, but you must not go very far. Now pray for me."* (Ex 8:28). As before, Pharaoh changes his mind and refuses to let the Hebrew people go. I am reminded so often how many times God has to speak to me to get me to move in His direction and follow His direction. I, like Pharaoh, have "heart disease"- hardness of heart that keeps me from the blessings, joy and peace of being in my Lord's perfect will!

Matthew 17

After six days, Jesus takes Peter and the brothers James and John to a mountain top. Jesus was transformed into a “person of light” and Elijah and Moses are seen talking with the transformed Jesus. What was their conversation? Did Moses speak about his personal encounters with the God of the universe? Did Elijah describe the many miracles he participated in? Did they recognize Jesus as the Messiah?

The disciples are understandable awed, and Peter- ever in action- decides that it would be good to make three shelters (booths as translated in the KJV) for Jesus, Elijah and Moses, and STAY in their presence. IT was as if Peter somehow knew that this was an important and miraculous occurrence that could somehow be “saved” and enjoyed for a long time. So many times I wish I could “save” a special moment and enjoy it forever- taking it with me wherever I went.

God speaks and literally knocks the disciples to their faces on the ground, and says to them *“This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased. Listen to him!”* (Matt 17:5). Just when we feel WE are in control God reminds us, sometimes dramatically, that HE is in control.

“And then Jesus came and touched them, and told them not to be afraid” (Matt 17:7). They looked up and saw only Jesus. The time for lawgiving and prophesy was over, the Messiah had come and was literally with them. Jesus told them not to speak of this amazing *revelation “until the Son of Man has been raised from the dead”* (Matt 17:9).

Since the disciples had just seen Elijah, it seems natural they would ask Jesus about him. “*Why must Elijah come first?”* (Matt17:10). Jesus explains that Elijah has indeed come first, and lately had come as one who paved the way for the Messiah- John the Baptist.

Later they came upon a crowd. As was the case so many times, someone wanted Jesus to heal. In this case a man was pleading for his epileptic son. The disciples had tried to heal the boy but had failed. Jesus was able to instantly heal the boy. When the disciples asked why they could not accomplish this healing, they were told very bluntly *“Because you have so little faith. Truly I tell you, if you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mountain, ‘Move from here to there,’ and it will move. Nothing will be impossible for you.”* (Matt 17:20-21).

Later in Galilee, Jesus predicts His death a second time. Although this “filled them with grief” (Matt17:23), they still could not understand or fully believe Jesus’ words.
The issue of money is always one that can easily cause difficulty among God’s people. How much are we to give? Are we to tithe or is that Old Testament teaching? How can we give to support a government whose actions we don’t support? Jesus asks Peter to participate in a small miracle, to go fishing, open the mouth of the fish he caught, and find a coin in the fish’s mouth to use to pay the temple tax. Jesus didn’t NEED to pay the tax because the tax was an atonement for sin, and Jesus had no sin!
Several messages could be drawn from this brief story; 1) God will provide for us for everything we need; 2) those in authority over us have a right to payment- as good citizens we should follow the law; or 3) the temple tax shouldn’t be applied to us, but pay it anyway. Scholars have puzzled over this through the years…perhaps someday we will know these answers.

Exodus 9-10 January 25, 2014 Matthew 18:1-20
The follow five more plagues on Egypt: 1) livestock, 2) boils, 3) hail, 4) locusts and 5) darkness. IT is important to note that these were not “magic tricks” or means by which an unmerciful God punished a hard hearted earthly leader and his people. These acts were done so that God would be seen as who He is- the Creator, Author, and omnipotent Power over His own creation. He alone put all the universe in motion, He alone knows the inmost workings of all its parts- hidden even to us today with our high-powered technology and “advanced” knowledge. Man’s ego seems to know n bounds. Each time in this account, Pharaoh is confronted with unmistakable evidence of Go’s power and authority, and each time he rejects the evidence in front of him and “hardens his heart”. The Scripture states that God hardens Pharaoh’s heart (Ex 10:27) each time until the last, most devastating plague. Is this to finally make God’s power personal to Pharaoh in the loss of Pharaoh’s first born? Is the last and most horrible plague a reminder to Pharaoh of the grief and sorrow felt by the Hebrew captives as his predecessor ordered the firstborn sons killed (Ex 1:16)?

Matthew 18:1-20

The greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven? Not the one we would choose, but God sees the heart. Jesus taught that we must become *"like little children"* (Matt 18:3) to enter the Kingdom. My confusion on first reading this passage years ago was that God wanted us to be simplistic and absolute, but as the years passed I began to see that God is holding up the simple trust of a child for their earthly parents- to do them good rather than harm- that God desires in us. Simple, pure trust in God's goodness and provision- this is the source of Kingdom life!

The Jesus goes on to caution us against causing one of these children to stumble, or any believer/brother/sister to stumble. It would be better to enter heaven maimed than hell with an intact body. This exaggeration forces us to look at what is truly important- not our physical selves but our relationship with the Father and His Son!

Verse 10 is a puzzle to me. What Jesus clearly states is that each child has a personal angel that is constantly in communication with God. Does that mean that we all have *"guardian angels"*? The Scripture seems to imply this.

The importance of finding the "lost sheep" is presented in an example/parable- the joy at finding the "lost one" is great in Heaven. Our human nature is that those of us "found" sheep might resent the attention given to the lost one. This problem with smugness and superiority- even entitlement- is dealt with later in Jesus' teaching of the Parable of the Lost (or Prodigal) Son (Luke 15:11-32).

Next Jesus teachers about handling sin in the church. This is a little confusing, since the "church" at that time was a collection of believers. The church historically was established after the resurrection (citation). The main message here, though, is the handling of sin within a body of believers, whatever their historic or theological description. When a brother or sister sins, go to THEM (don't gossip about them or go to the shepherd/pastor) and confront them. If the counsel is rejected, then two persons are to go, then the church is to be consulted, and ultimately this person is to be expelled from the body. The purpose of this discipline is to reclaim the person and turn them from their sin!

Following are two passages that have been either widely misinterpreted or taken out of context. These are passages I like to call "wall hanging passages" that are frequently seen in Christian homes. The first is *"...if two of you on earth agree about anything they ask for, it will be done for them by my Father in Heaven"* (Matt 18:19), followed by *"...where two or three gather in my Name, there I am with them."* (Matt 18:20). Both of these passages are in the context of church discipline, in which Godly judgment is a necessity and great spiritual strength is required. Seen in context, these passages make perfect sense. The problem with the first out of context is the word "anything". Our anything and God's anything are frequently very different! As to the second, Jesus is not really requiring a "quorum" of believers as a condition for His presence. He is WITH us always- in or out of any group!

Exodus 11-12 January 26th, 2014 Matthew 18:21-35

The stage has been set for the last and most horrific plague- the plague of the firstborn. Before unleashing this plague, God reminds Moses to tell his people to ask for silver and gold articles. God has already predisposed the Egyptians to give these items to the captive Hebrew people. Later they will be used for God's glory in the Temple.

At midnight the “destroyer” (Ex 12:23) would go from house to house killing the firstborn. Only then will Pharaoh relent and let the Hebrew people go! Since this is a time of “starting over”, God instructs Moses to name this month the first month of the year, and the directions for observing and remembering the great Passover are given. The modern version, the Seder meal, is still observed today by Jews and even by some Christians who would learn from the experience the great provisions of God. The details of the first observance are important to us in that they hint of the shedding of Jesus’ blood- the very Lamb of God- as the blood of the lamb is placed on the sides and tops of the doorframe of the house- very much like the blood shed on the cross. The Hebrews, like us, a “covered” by the blood of the lamb/Lamb! Unleavened bread is prepared, since the people are to leave *“in haste”* (Ex 12:11).

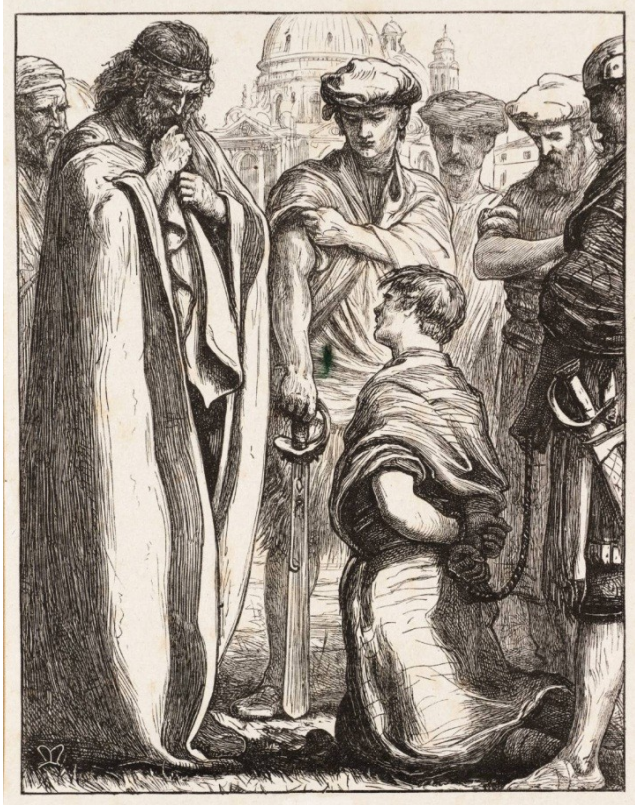
In verse 24-28 God instructs His people to observe this celebration of Passover each year, at the same time of the year as a “lasting ordinance” (Ex 12:24). How often we need to be reminded of God’s grace, mercy and deliverance.

Pharaoh is overcome with grief, and finally relents and tells Moses: *“Up! Leave my people, you and the Israelites! Go, worship the Lord as you have requested. Take your flocks and herds, as you have said, and go. And also bless me.”* (Ex 12:31-32). It is remarkable to me that Pharaoh would ask for a blessing- perhaps even the hardest of hearts can see God- even if under duress.

So under the urging of the Pharaoh to “hurry”, some 600,000 men – plus women and children- leave Egypt. It has been 430 years of captivity, the trials and troubles of God’s people are by no means over. Chapter 12 ends with God’s instructions on observing the Passover- in God’s grace the “foreigner” is included (with restrictions), for God’s people were themselves “foreigners” in Egypt!

Matthew 18:21-35

Mercy and forgiveness…how many times must I forgive my brother or sister who has sinned against me…surely there is a limit to forgiveness. When Jesus was asked this important question, He answered by telling a story/parable about an unmerciful servant. This servant owed a lifetime’s wages (about 20 years of a day laborer’s wages) or *“ten thousand bags of gold”* (Matt 18:26). The servant’s master forgave this enormous debt and let the servant go free. Just the same day, another person who owed the servant a small amount was choked and thrown into prison over this small debt. The other servant quickly told the master about this terrible unforgiveness, and he was handed over to the jailers and made to repay his large debt. Jesus tells His disciples that this is how God’s forgiveness works- He expects us to forgive from the heart (Matt 18:35) or we cannot be forgiven ourselves. A hard lesson to be sure but a very critical one for all of us who bear Jesus’ Name. WE must humbly ask God to touch our hearts and give us a forgiving spirit so we can receive God’s amazing forgiveness!



Exodus 13-15 January 27th, 2014 Matthew 19:1-15

Consecration and commemoration…two ways we remember God and His power, authority and grace. The firstborn was like the first fruits…thought by tradition to be "the best". We are always to offer God our best, and not the "leftovers of convenience". Several times in the Old Testament (Hebrew Scriptures, if you prefer) God alludes to children asking important questions. In this case, the question is about the observance of the Passover. The answer is clear and instructive: *"With a mighty hand the Lord brought us out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery. When Pharaoh stubbornly refused to let us go, the Lord killed the firstborn of both people and animals in Egypt. This is why I sacrifice to the Lord the first male offspring of every womb and redeem each of my firstborn sons."* (Ex 13:14-15). God lead His people to the sea as He *"..went ahead of them in a pillar of cloud to guide them on their way and by night in a pillar of fire to give them light, so that they could travel by day or night."* (Ex 13:21). God's guidance to them was clear and unmistakable- even though He led them into a situation that would soon look catastrophic, He knew the plans He had for them were to prosper them and again show His mighty hand (Jer. 29:11).

God then revealed part of His plan to Moses. He told Moses: *"I will harden Pharaoh's heart, and he will pursue them. But I will gain glory for myself through Pharaoh and all his army, and the Egyptians will know that I am the Lord."*(Ex 14:4). So the stage was set for what seemed to be a disaster- the Hebrew people, essentially defenseless, pursued by the mighty and well equipped army of the Pharaoh. Certainly a disaster in the making! But God had other plans. God said: *"Why are you crying out to me? Tell the Israelites to move on. Raise your staff and stretch out your hand over the sea to divide the water so that the Israelites can go*

through the sea on dry ground. I will harden the hearts of the Egyptians so that they will go in after them. And I will gain glory through Pharaoh and all his army, through his chariots and his horsemen. The Egyptians will know that I am the Lord when I gain glory through Pharaoh, his chariots and his horsemen." (Ex 14:16-18). And Moses was obedient. While the angel of God put darkness in between the army of Egypt and the Hebrew people, they were given time to cross though the parted Red (Reed) Sea.

Then the Egyptians followed and filled the (now) dry sea bottom with their horses and chariots. But Moses was told by God: *"Stretch out your hand over the sea so that the waters may flow back over the Egyptians and their chariots and horsemen."* (Ex 14:26). Not a single soldier survived! (Ex 14:28).

What follows in this narrative is a song of joy and deliverance as sung by Moses and Miriam, Moses' sister. *"Sing to the Lord, for he is highly exalted. Both horse and driver he has hurled into the sea."* (Ex 15:21).

Only days after this miraculous deliverance, the Hebrew people were led into the desert near Shur, and went three days without water. No commodity is more precious in the desert than water- more precious than food or shelter! The waters at Marah were bitter ("Marah" is Hebrew for "bitter"). The God showed Moses a piece of wood, which Moses threw into the water and removed its bitterness. This is one of my favorite chemistry lessens- the water was bitter because it was alkaline, and the wood probably contained enough natural acid to neutralize and "sweeten" the water. Better living through chemistry- God's chemistry that is!

The next instruction God gives His people is of special interest to me since I spent 30 years at the national Centers for Disease Control. God is giving His people a prescription that will allow them to avoid *"the diseases I brought on the Egyptians"* (Ex 15:26). My guess is that some of the decrees given by God had to do with diet, as specified in the Law given later in the Books of Moses (the Pentateuch).

Matthew 19:1-15

Divorce is often ranked as one of the most serious life change events. The family was intended by God to be a unit for the preservation of humanity, for nurture and rearing of children, and for establishment of the basic unit to insure the stability of

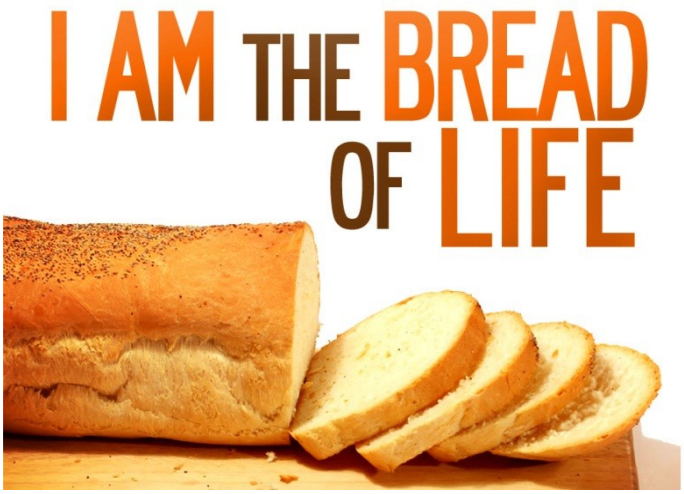
the community and nation. We, who are marked by sin, have disrupted this plan and pursued our own interests – to the detriment of the family and God's plan for the family! Jesus tells the experts in the law that divorce was allowed *".because your hearts were hard"* (Matt 19:8).

Jesus points to the original plan in Eden, where the first family was created. He clearly states that *"..what God has joined together, let no one separate."* (Matt 19:6). I am so glad that this Scripture has found its way into so many marriage vows. May God give us the strength, faith and love to fulfill these vows!

Little children seemed to be drawn to Jesus- often almost magnetically. He was so kind, loving and approachable that children trusted Him immediately. When His disciples tried to prevent children from reaching Jesus to be prayed over, He told them *clearly ".Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these."*(Matt 19:14). The Kingdom does indeed belong to those who love and trust God, and approach him with single-minded faith.

Exodus 16-18 January 28, 2014 Matthew 19:16-30

We will never starve in God's care…even if we "starve" in a physical sense He is always with us. And yet when our stomachs growl we sometimes complain about food- not enough, not the right food, not the right food when we want it…..and so on. The Hebrew people had just been provided water and yet found occasion to complain about their present state of "food". They grumbled to Moses (and to God): *"If only we had died by the Lord's hand in Egypt! There we sat around pots of meat and ate all the food we wanted, but you have brought us out into this desert to starve this entire assembly to death."* (Ex 16:3). Yet God had (and always does have) a perfect plan for them. The provision for their food would go with them wherever they were, and would be sufficient for the day. The substance provided was "manna" which sounds like the Hebrew "What is it?". The directions were clear- only enough would be provided for each day- they were not to "hoard" it, and a double portion provided before the Sabbath. God was teaching His people about "bread from heaven", which He would later provide as His Son (John 6:35).



Now that bread has been provided, the complaint comes about meat. I truly believe that God showed not only His anger but also a sense of humor when He literally

flooded the Hebrew camp with quail/meat! (Ex 16:13) *"…That evening quail came and covered the camp."* It was as if God was saying, "Meat, I'll show you meat!".

It was important to memorialize God's provision and saving acts among His people, so Moses commanded the Hebrew people: *"Take a jar and put an omer of manna in it. Then place it before the Lord to be kept for the generations to come."* (Ex 16:33).

The following "small miracle" shows God's provision for His people- again. It was as if the Hebrew people needed to be reminded over and over that God would provide. As they wandered in the desert, they likely wondered…Will we find water here..? So God had Moses strike a rock, when then provided water for all! Later He would tell Moses to "speak to the rock", but Moses in frustration- and disobedience- would strike it instead. (Num. 20:8). Many Bible scholars believe that this was the reason Moses was not allowed to enter the Promised Land, as stated in Numbers 20:12 *"… Because you did not trust in me enough to honor me as holy in the sight of the Israelites, you will not bring this community into the land I give them."* Imagine that!- a man who had enough faith to challenge the Pharaoh, and to lead his people in the desert, was criticized – and punished- for a single small act of disobedience. The lesson I draw from this is that we are to obey God completely- partial obedience is the same to Him as disobedience. A hard lesson, but an important one- and one I need personally to take to heart.

Just as the "water woes" are over, a new challenge arises- the Amalekites attack the Hebrew people. Moses tells Joshua to select a few men to fight them, and he will watch the battle while holding his staff. When Moses' hands were raised, the Hebrews were winning, when lowered, the Amalekites. Moses grew tired and received help from Aaron and Hur, and they held Moses' hands up "until sunset" and the Hebrews prevailed. (Ex 17:13). After the victory Moses builds an altar and calls it "God is my Banner" (Jehovah Nissi). God promises to "blot out" the Amalekites forever.

Moses then rejoins Jethro, who has kept up with Moses' life events during Moses' absence from Midian. Jethro is, in fact, so pleased with Moses- and so impressed with God, that he initiates an act of worship and sacrifice. How often are we called to be witnesses of the "Good News"- and how blessed it is to see positive results- "fruits"- from our efforts at evangelism. As the Scripture tells the story "… Jethro was delighted to hear about all the good things the Lord had done for Israel in rescuing them from the hand of the Egyptians. He said, *"Praise be to the Lord, who rescued you from the hand of the Egyptians and of Pharaoh, and who rescued the people from the hand of the Egyptians. Now I know that the Lord is greater than all other gods, for he did this to those who had treated Israel arrogantly." Then Jethro, Moses' father-in-law, brought a burnt offering and other sacrifices to God, and Aaron came with all the elders of Israel to eat a meal with Moses' father-in-law in the presence of God."* (Ex 18:10-12).

The Jethro suggests that Moses delegate his authority, since he was overwhelmed with decision making and judging the issues of all his people. The "difficult cases" (Ex 17:26) Moses would take, but the simpler issues and cases were delegated to "capable and trustworthy men" (Ex 17:21). Thus, leadership, if it is to be effective, usually involves delegation of authority and trust.

Matthew 19:16-30

The “rich, young” ruler approaches Jesus with an important question. *“What good thing must I do to inherit eternal life?”* (Matt 19:16). The description given- a rich young ruler- is actually a composite of three Gospel accounts of this story. We find he is “rich” in Matthew’s account; a “ruler” from Luke 18, and “young” from Mark 10 (although his youth is implied rather than stated in most translations). Jesus saw clearly that this person’s wealth was the defining reality in his life, and if he were to serve and please God he must divulge himself of this obstacle. Some commentators have correctly pointed out that giving away wealth without losing a desire for it would do no good. In fact, some would desire the wealth they just “gave away” or “got rid of” even more than when they had the wealth. The young man leaves Jesus with great sadness, simply because he was unwilling to remove the greatest obstacle between himself and God, and become free of the burdens of wealth.

Jesus then goes on and uses this teaching moment to express how difficult it is to enter the Kingdom of God. I believe He was trying to get His disciples to truly understand that only God- and faith in God- would make entry possible! As Jesus clearly teaches *“..With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible.”* (Matthew 19:26). Then Jesus points His disciples to the new order of things…the “last” shall be “first” (in the Kingdom) and the “first” shall be “last”. How important it is to see that the Kingdom is not only a re-creation but a re-ordering of all things.

Exodus 19-21 January 29, 2014 Matthew 20:1-16

The Desert of Sinai…a forbidding, hostile place. And located in the Southern part of the desert is the impressive natural feature of Mount Sinai.

And it was there that God made a wonderful promise to His people: *". Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession. Although the whole earth is mine, you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.' These are the words you are to speak to the Israelites."* (Ex 19:5-6). When confronted with such an awesome promise. God's people immediately agreed… *"We will do everything the Lord has said."* (Ex 19:8). Simple agreement was not sufficient for God- now or then. The people who so quickly agreed with God were most likely listening to the "kingdom of priests and holy nation" part but not clearly hearing or understanding the "obey Me fully and keep My covenant" part. We hear what we want to hear!

What follows is a consecration, a consecration- a "setting aside the common for sacred use"- the people were told to purify themselves and wait for God to speak. No one except Moses was to approach the mountain. Some scholars feel the description of the mountain as having "smoke" and "fire" and "trembling violently" was a description of an active volcano, which has many of these characteristics. These scholars include Professor Colin Humphreys of Cambridge University, who places the mountain in Saudi Arabia rather than Egypt. Regardless of whether the mountain was a volcano, or simply was responding to God's incredible power, it was a place of central importance to our understanding of God and His claims on us as His people.

In Chapter 20 of Exodus we find the Ten Commandments (also in Deuteronomy 5:6-21). The moral and spiritual values and precepts here are unmatched in all the religions of man. The first commandment is the foundational one- when we love and serve ONLY our God, then everything else falls into place! So many commentators have analyzed the commandments that I hardly feel I can add to their voluminous commentary. To my way of thinking, there are two sections- commandments 1-4 which deal with our relationship with God, a transitional commandment- honoring parents- and 5 which directly deal with our individual spiritual life. Much has been said about Exodus 20:13…a prohibition against murder (not "killing"). Some believe that "murder" was defined only as the unwarranted killing of a fellow Hebrew. The Hebrew word used here is "rasah". According to Baker's Evangelical Dictionary. "Rasah" *probably had a specialized meaning, possibly in connection with the killing (whether premeditated or accidental) of*

anyone in the covenant community, especially that which brought illegal violence. The sixth commandment therefore protected the individual Israelite within the community from any danger.

It is also important to note that the people "trembled with fear" by what they saw and heard (Ex 20:18) and Moses comforted them but gave credibility to their fear by saying to them: *"Do not be afraid. God has come to test you, so that the fear of God will be with you to keep you from sinning."* (Ex 20:20). I have always struggled with the "fear of God", but as I have gained more experience it seems clear that our awesome Creator God inspires awe, and probably fear of His disapproval and anger.

God then specifically prohibited idols made of silver or gold. These noble metals have always been treasured for their durability and natural beauty (as well as rarity). It was "logical" for men to make their "gods" out of these metals. Yet God speaks clearly here- He is the ultimate value- and giver of value. There is no place for anything other than Him to be revered and worshipped. He demands- and deserves- first place in our lives. God's people were also instructed to "make an altar" either of earth or stone, but not "dressed stone". No implements were to be used to shape or alter the stones.

Later this practice was observed in building the Temple in Jerusalem, where the "dressing" was allowed but only at a distance (usually near the location where the stones were quarried.) (1 Kings 6:7).

Chapter 21 is a listing of "laws" that are to be followed by God's people. I suppose God understood that some more detail beyond that specified in the Commandments was necessary. It is one thing to read and obey God's commentary on His own law, but quite another to expand, edit, and add further man made interpretations to the Law as God's people did over the years. By the time of Jesus, the original Law was a massive set of specifics which missed the mark in that outward behavior had replaced a Godly spirit. This is just another example of how we humans take a beautiful thing literally "breathed by God" and turn it into its very opposite. God wanted to (and wants to) claim our hearts- we want to follow rules that we understand and that we have made (and edited) to fit ourselves. So once more, the infinite, pure and beautiful becomes ordinary and lifeless!

Some of God's law could be very harshly interpreted. The very letter of the law, for example, in Exodus 21:17 is: *"Anyone who curses their father or mother is to be put to death."* There have been very few occasions that the death penalty has been applied to children for this reason. My thinking here is that God is "shocking" us into seeing the horrible and destructive nature of parental disrespect. The family is the core unit of any society, and this kind of disrespect literally tears the family unit apart. Most of us are happier with the fifth commandment, which is a commandment with a promise…we are more comfortable meditating on the words of Exodus 20:12 "Honor your father and your mother, so that you may live long in the land the Lord your God is giving you." We are not given the liberty of ignoring God's very words, however! We are compelled to see how seriously God takes the family unit and its structure of respect and love.

Matthew 20:1-16

Workers in a vineyard in this parable were apparently somewhat like the "day laborers" of today. In a modern setting, workers desiring day labor gather at well-known locations and wait for offers of employment. They are usually paid by the day and in cash.

In this parable/story the vineyard owner finds workers “early in the morning” (Matt 20:1), then finds he needs more workers and collects more “at nine in the morning” (Matt 20:3) at noon (20:5), at three in the afternoon and finally at five (Matt 20:6). They all worked in the vineyard- some all day and some only a few hours. The standard daily wage for such labor was a denarius- worth somewhere around $20 in modern US currency. The workers hired last were paid first, each receiving a denarius. The other workers expected that they would receive more, since they had worked longer- certainly a “reasonable expectation”! (Matt 20:10). When they also received the same pay, they were upset and complained to the vineyard owner: *“These who were hired last worked only one hour,’ they said, ‘and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the work and the heat of the day.’”* (Matt 20:12). The vineyard owner explained that each had received a fair day’s wage, and that he was being “generous”. Yet in our limited human reasoning, instead of rejoicing in and respecting generosity, we complain and compare ourselves with others, and sometimes become jealous in the process. How dare the vineyard owner behave like that…we are being treated unfairly…we should have more…or worse still, we are entitled to more. And so we who bear Christ’s Name complain about unfairness- how others “worse than us” or that are clearly “sinners” receive God’s astounding grace- surely we are “entitled” to more. Jesus does not give us that option- He states clearly that the “first will be last” and the “last will be first”. Our sense of morality, of “deserving”. of “correctness” is a pale shadow of real grace and forgiveness. Those who we “look down on” and call “unworthy” are in some cases the very persons who are depending on God for everything, not caring whether we think of them as “spiritual” or “deserving”. As one wise person once said “We will be surprised who IS in Heaven, and even more surprised who ISN’T!”

One of many who have voiced that sentiment is the Reverend Adam Roher, in a sermon delivered to the 1st Covenant Church, August 21st, 2011(http://firstcovchurch.com/messages/text/17-you-might-be-surprised-at-who-is-in-heaven.html) Well worth a read!

Exodus 22-24 January 30, 2014 Matthew 20:17-34

The law- a foundation for righteous living. Some of the founding principles of modern law are found in these passages from Exodus. The right to defend home and property from thieves is stated clearly in Exodus 22:2-3: *“If a thief is caught breaking in at night and is struck a fatal blow, the defender is not guilty of bloodshed; but if it happens after sunrise, the defender is guilty of bloodshed.”* Verses 18-25 outline several important principles: 1) sorcery is forbidden (we will see this later in the tragic story of King Saul); 2) sacrifices to “other gods” are punishable by death; 3) the widow, fatherless and foreigner are to be treated well; 4) no interest is to be charged to other Hebrew people. This last point was the source of some incredible anti- Semitism- particularly in Europe, where the lending practices of the Jews in were found offensive to the Gentile Christians. The requirement to offer to God the firstborn is spelled out in verse 29-30. The “best”, the firstborn, were to be offered to God!

Laws pertaining to false reports, following “the crowd” which is doing wrong (Ex 23:2) and favoring the rich over the poor in a court of law are all clearly delineated. Similarly, laws about the Sabbath observance (Ex 23:10-13) and annual observances (Ex 23:14-19) are also given.

The passage immediately following these "law" passages is about following God''s angel *"...my name is in him"* (Ex 23:21) to conquer and occupy the people presently living in the Promised Land. God clearly states that He will "wipe out" the enemies of His people, *"..the Amorites, Hittites, Perizzites, Canaanites, Hivites and Jebusites..."* (Ex 23:23). Many have wondered about this prescription for complete destruction of the enemies of God's people. It does not seem to be consistent with a loving and merciful God to prescribe total destruction of any people. Surely the children are innocent...! Yet this is exactly what is prescribed. God knew that the presence of other "people" with foreign cultures and religions would divide the devotion of His people and be a *"snare to you."* (Ex 23:33). Solomon's story is a perfect illustration of this principle. What prevented Solomon from achieving even greater glory than he did was his affiliation with "foreign wives" and their attendant religions. Without a total focus on the one True God, God's people could not become the people they were created to be. We must simply trust God's judgment (and mercy) here. What seems to us to be unmerciful is in fact merciful when seen from His perspective. God was protecting His people, and removing obstacles to their full enjoyment of their unique relationship with Him.

The covenant God had established with Moses is then confirmed in an elaborate ceremony of sacrifice. Al altar was built, and twelve pillars (representing the 12 tribes of Israel) were erected (Ex 24:4). Blood is sprinkled on the people and splashed on the altar (Ex 24:5-8). This blood is a type of the sacrificial blood that Jesus was to shed later for these same people, and for all! Only in the shedding of blood is the remission (forgiveness) of sin obtained (Heb 9:22).

An amazing appearance of God Himself (a "theophany") is recorded in verses 9-11. God appears to Moses *"and Aaron, Nadab and Abihu, and the seventy elders of Israel"* (Ex 24:9). They saw God, and then the Scripture states that they "ate and drank" (Ex 24:11). The appearance of God is similar to that described in Revelation *"Under his feet was something like a pavement made of lapis lazuli, as bright blue as the sky."* (Ex 24:10).

God then invited Moses to the mountain, where a permanent (or what should have been permanent) copy of the commandments is made (Ex 24:12). As we know, Moses later broke those stone tablets in his outrage against the sins of his people, and later they were replaced by God himself (Ex 32:19). Moses stayed on the mountaintop for "40 days and nights" and prayed and fasted. This number 40 is seen elsewhere in Scripture, notable in Jesus' stay in the wilderness at the beginning of His earthly ministry (Matthew 4:2). For an interesting recounting of this time period in Bile history, please see: http://www.gotquestions.org/40-days-Bible.html.

Matthew 20:17-34

Who wants to hear bad news? We often "blame the messenger" when bad news is thrust upon us. Jesus had some "bad news" for His disciples, and for the third time He specifically describes what His fate at the hands of men will be. One can only wonder if the disciples ever really understood or believed Jesus' words. (Matt 20:17-19).

James and John's mother then pled with Jesus for a "special place" for her two beloved sons. Do we often expect (sometimes secretly) that WE will earn some "special place" in the Kingdom because of our faithfulness and devotion to God? Jesus puts this matter to rest by explaining the very purpose that He came for- to

serve, and not to “be served” and more importantly to *“give His life as a ransom for many”* (Matt 20:28). The traditions of the church state that James was later killed by the sword by Herod the Tetrarch, and that John died of natural causes. So Jesus’ comments that these two brothers would “drink from His cup (the cup of suffering and death)” (Matt 20:23) seems to indicate that both will suffer for the Gospel- James by martyrdom and John by exile to Patmos.

Following is one of several instances in which the blind receive sight. This was to be one of the many signs of the Messiah (Isaiah 61;1). Some have suggested that when Jesus heals a man blind from birth (John 9:1-12) that He was clearly showing power that was reserved only for God, and therefore was announcing by this sign that he was the equal of God. This was also the case when Jesus received worship and forgave sin. (Matt 2:11; 14:33; 18:1; 21:9; 24:9; Mark 16:1; Luke 24:10; John 12:13) (Mark 2:5-10; John 17:6-8; John 13:3).

How awesome it must have been for Jesus to ask *“What do you want me to do for you?”* (Matt 20:32)! And yet He asks the same to us today- may we always be willing to take His easy yoke, bear the “light burdens” and follow and receive from Him. And He healed the two blind men, and then they “followed him” (Matt 20:34).

Exodus 25-26 January 31, 2014 Matthew 21:1-22

God told Moses to build Him a place of dwelling, a place where the people could worship and sacrifice, and a place that would be portable so that His presence would go with them as they travelled. God instructed Moses to collect specific items from the people, *"...from everyone whose heart prompts them to give."* (Ex 25:2). Later in Scripture we see this same principle "..God loves a cheerful giver" (2 Cor. 9:7). Giving to the Lord is many things, a sacrifice, a gift of gratitude, an obedient act- but in its best and purest form it is joyful and brings cheer since we are permitted to participate with God in changing the world and building His Kingdom.

God is sometimes very specific as to His requirements for gifts, as He is here *"Make this tabernacle and all its furnishings exactly like the pattern I will show you."* (Ex 25:9). Very specific directions and specifications are then given by God for the Ark (which will contain the tablets bearing the Commandments), the Table- which is to be the location of the Bread of Presence, and the Lampstand. About 75 pounds of gold is to be used in the construction of the lampstand. Later in Scripture we will see the lamp stand referred to again in the form of the two witnesses in Revelation (Rev 11:4). God is teaching His people several things- He will be present with them; He is the provider (as symbolized by the bread) and He is their light (as symbolized by the lamp stand.)
The Tabernacle itself was a large "tent". The specifications given include the royal color purple (Ex 26:1) and finest gold. These precious and rare commodities reflect the purity and infinite value of God. The gold, which never rusts, is a symbol of the treasure that He gives that will never pass away. All these things, like the cathedrals that would follow in history, are constant reminders of the treasure God has shared with us so generously, the treasure of Himself and His presence!

Matthew 21:1-22

Jesus knew…that He was to go to Jerusalem…that He was to receive the adulation of the crowds who hungered for "their" Messiah…that a cruel death at the hands of His enemies awaited…and He went- obediently and in fulfilment of prophesy. Zechariah 9:9 describes the entry of the Son of Man humbly on a donkey…
"Say to Daughter Zion,
'See, your king comes to you,
gentle and riding on a donkey,
and on a colt, the foal of a donkey.'"
And the cried *"Hosannah"- "Blessed is He who comes in the Name of the Lord"* Matt (21:9).
When Jesus reached the Temple He was outrages with the practices of the money changers and sellers of doves (Matt 21:12-13). The Jewish Law prohibited any coins that bore the image of a man or animal….such as the common currency of the day- only "plain" money was acceptable and the money changers exacted huge profits from the faithful. In like fashion, the selling of doves to sacrifice was done with a large profit to the vendors. Jesus' words help us understand some of His view of the church.. *"'My house will be called a house of prayer, 'but you are making it 'a den of robbers.'* (Matt 21:13 quoting Jer. 7:11)

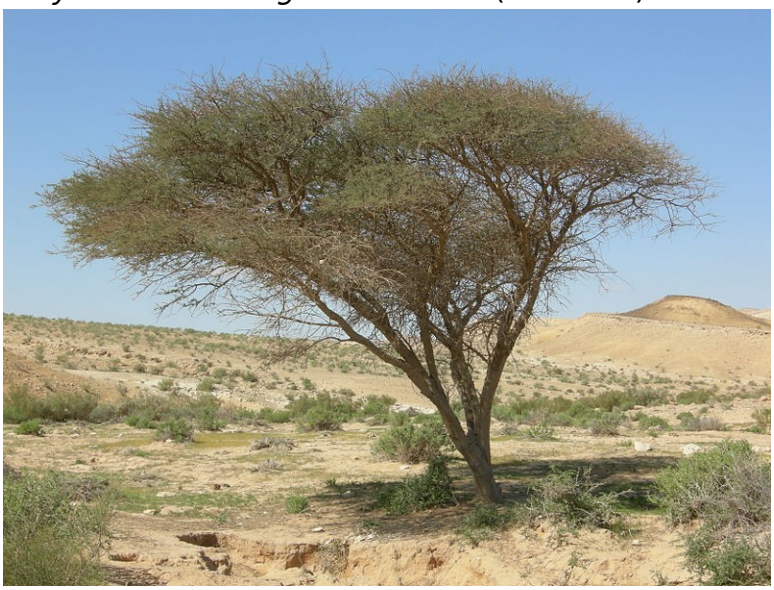
Jesus healed the lame and blind at the Temple and earned the praise of the people, as well as the outrage of the “chief priests and teachers of the law” (Matt 21:15). How dare this uneducated outsider do things to “impress the people” or so they thought. The children present were shouting *"Hosannah to the Son of David”* (Matt 21:15) to the surprise and outrage of the religious leaders. When questioned about this, Jesus answered with Scripture: (Psalm 8:2)

“‘From the lips of children and infants
you, Lord, have called forth your praise’?”

Jesus then left for Bethany, a town some 1½ miles away. On His way back to Jerusalem, Jesus was hungry and tried to gather a fig from a tree by the road. Finding only leaves, He said *“May you never bear fruit again”* (Matt 21:19). To the disciples, this withering of the fig tree after Jesus’ angry words was nothing short of a miracle! Jesus was always sensitive to a “teachable moment”, and explained that not only was this small miracle available to a faithful person, but also much more- even moving a mountain, as He states *“If you believe, you will receive whatever you ask for in prayer.”* (Matt 21:22). Some would take this statement to mean that WHATEVER we ask, regardless of a context of faithful obedience, is available to us. But if you “have faith and do not doubt” (Matt 21:21), then you will ask only for what is in God’s will for you. A similar teaching is in Psalm 37:4, in which we are promised “the desires of our heart”- a faithful and obedient heart will be only found in a trusting and loving servant- whose will is aligned with God’s will!

Exodus 27-8 **February 1, 2014** **Matthew 21:23-46**

The acacia wood specified in the building of the altar is one of the few "trees" in this part of the world. Its history and symbolism can be traced through the centuries. In many cultures the acacia is a symbol both of purity and endurance of the soul as well as immortality and resurrection. As used here, the acacia wood is part of the place of sacrifice. It was to be overlaid in bronze, and constructed exactly according to the specifications God gave Moses "on the mountain" (Ex 27:8). Specifications for the courtyard around the altar are given (Ex 27:9-19), as well as for the oil for the lampstands (Ex 27:20-21). The oil is to be olive oil *"clear oil of pressed olives"* (Ex 27:20). This is probably what we in modern times call the "virgin" grade of olive oil from the first pressing of the olives. The "best" is specified and expected by God!
Chapter 28 of Exodus is a description of the priestly garments. One striking feature of these garments, in addition to their striking beauty, is the inclusion of the Urim and Thummin (Ex 28:30) in the breast piece of the high priest (in this case ,Aaron). These were essentially two sided dice, in which the will of God was to be determined in very difficult decisions. The Hebrew people believed that God would determine the correct outcome of the consulting of these devices. (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Urim_and_Thummim).
These garments were to be worn by the priests when they entered the Tabernacle/Tent of Meeting: *"Aaron and his sons must wear them whenever they enter the tent of meeting or approach the altar to minister in the Holy Place, so that they will not incur guilt and die."* (Ex 28:43)


Acacia Tree

Matthew 21:23-46

Authority was an important issue for the religious leaders of Jesus' day (and of any day, for that matter). The experts in the law jealously guarded their education, training and resulting positions of authority. They sincerely believed they were speaking out of the authority given in the God given Law of God! Jesus was not

behaving in a way that the religious leaders expected or desired. Instead of giving the places of honor or deference, Jesus openly contradicted many of the "laws" that were so dear to the hearts of the "experts". Naturally, they questioned Jesus' authority. *"By what authority are you doing these things?" they asked. "And who gave you this authority?"* (Matt 21:23). Jesus answered the question with another question. This was a technique used by rabbis and rabbinical students to show that they understood (and knew the answer to) not only the question asked but the larger context of the question. Jesus asked them*: "John's baptism—where did it come from? Was it from heaven, or of human origin?"* (Matt 21:25). Now Jesus had put them in a real dilemma. If they said John's baptism was from God, then why didn't they believe it (and repent)? If John's baptism was only from man, then their saying that would enrage the people, who considered John to be a prophet (Matt 21:26). The answer was *"We don't know",* giving Jesus the opportunity to refuse to answer the question. One might ask, why didn't Jesus take this opportunity to publically proclaim his Sonship, his being the Messiah, and being God's Son? Perhaps the answer lies, as always, in God's perfect timing. The time was simply not right for such a public declaration. Jesus' public claim to be the Messiah might have galvanized the religious leaders into action- and there still remained dome tasks in God's Will for His Son!

However, Jesus does not let the religious leaders escape His presence without a challenge. He tells the story of two sons- one who professes obedience but then disobeys, the other who initially refuses to obey, but then does his father's will. *"Which of the two did what his father wanted?" "The first," they answered.* (Matt 21:31). Jesus then tells the religious leaders that the "sinners" who believed John are ahead of them in the Kingdom of God. Jesus implies that they knew the truth of John's testimony but did not truly believe him and repent. I am certain they were not pleased by this interchange.

Jesus presses the point further by telling the parable of the Tenants. As the story unfolds, it becomes clear to the religious leaders that Jesus is again talking about them (Matt 23:45), and began their plans to arrest Him. They were "afraid of the crowd" because of Jesus' popularity and spiritual standing. It may have been that they realized that they would have to arrest Jesus out of public view.

Exodus 29-30 February 2, 2014 Matthew 22:1-22

Consecration- a word seldom used in everyday language. The dictionary definition of consecration is " setting apart for the service of God of both persons and objects.". The priests were part of the tribes of Israel (tribe of Levi) but were literally and symbolically "set apart" from the rest of God's people. They did not receive allocations of land, they were only given cities to dwell in (Josh 13:33). They learned the rituals and the law as it relates to the worship which was a central part of the identity of their people. "Notable descendants of the Levite dynasty according to the Bible include Miriam, Samuel, Ezekiel, Ezra, and Malachi. The descendants of Aaron, who was the first kohen gadol, high priest, of Israel, were designated as the priestly class, the Kohanim." (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Levite).

Exact directions and specifications were given for the priestly attire (Ex 29:5-9) and for the blood sacrifice (Ex 29:10-14) of bulls. Sacrifice of rams was covered also (Ex 29:15-28). I have often wondered if the priests, when sacrificing rams, were reminded of God's great gift and provision of a sacrificial ram in the story of

Abraham and Isaac (Gen 22:1-13). Sacrifice of two lambs daily is described in Exodus 29:38-41. Jesus, of course, was the very Lamb of God (John 1:29; 36 Rev 5:6; 8 Rev 7:17), and would be our sacrifice *"once and for all"* (Heb. 7:27; 9:12).

God reminds His people that he will dwell with them (Ex 29:45) and that He alone is the God who delivered them out of Egypt. God's reminders are both helpful and necessary…so often we "forget" or ask God "What have you done for me lately?" God's reminders help us to escape such an attitude of entitlement and instead focus with gratitude on His mercy and grace.

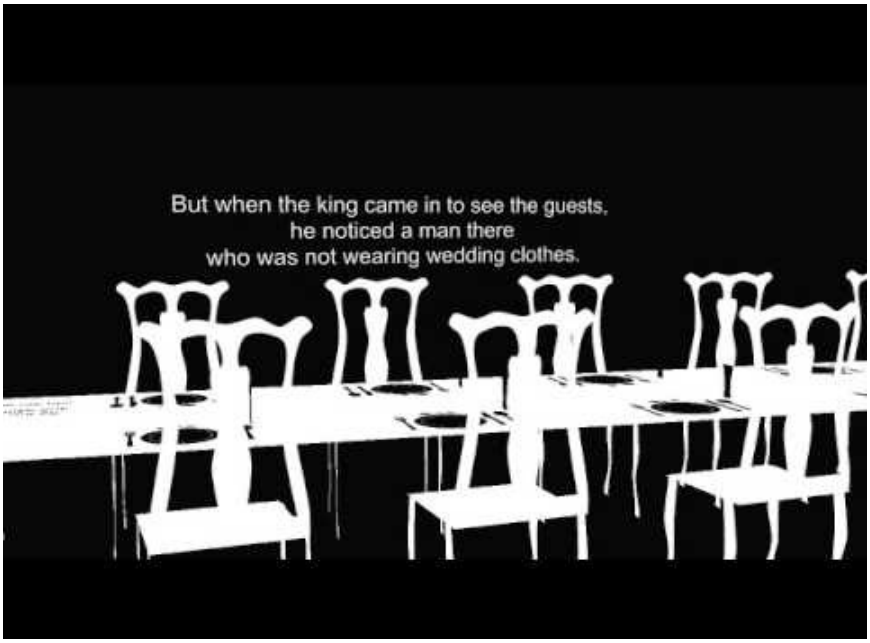
The altar of incense is described in Exodus 30. It is to be used only to burn "fragrant incense" (Ex 30:7) and receive a sin offering once a year (for atonement of sins) (Ex 30:10). Next is a description of "atonement money", to be given during a census. The Scripture describes this offering as "a ransom for his life" (Ex 30:12). God is reminding His people that He literally saved all their lives by the miracle at the Red Sea. They, like we, often need to be reminded of important things! Next is described the ceremonial hand washing to be done before entering the Temple/Tent of Meeting. This kind of ritual is to get Jesus into the ire of the Pharisees later (Mark 7:1-15), when His disciples did not follow a similar hand washing ritual before eating.

The anointing oil is specified in Exodus 30:22-33. This is a special oil, and it is "set apart" as the Levites/priests are "set apart" for religious observances and worship only. The penalty for misusing this specially formulated oil is that the person guilty would be "cut off from the people"- rejected from fellowship and excluded from the Covenant. (Ex 30:33). This banishment was taken very seriously!

Similarly the incense used in worship was "holy to the Lord" (Ex 30:37). The penalty for its misuse was the same as for misuse of the anointing oil.

Matthew 22:1-22

A wedding banquet! Especially a "royal" wedding banquet. Why wouldn't one want to come to such a wonderful and festive occasion. The party was sure to be "top drawer"- the best of everything. And yet, the invited guests refused to come. (Matt 22:2-4). Each of the guests had their own excuse- to the fields, to a business activity. Some were so enraged at the messengers sent to urge their attendance that they *"seized his servants, mistreated them and killed them."* (Matt 22:5). Then the king opens the invitation to "all", and then the wedding hall was filled. However, one of the guests was discovered to be in attendance "not wearing wedding clothes" (Matt 22:11). He was then bound, and thrown out of the party. Jesus' hearers probably differed in their understanding of His words as much as we do. Some simply heard an interesting and entertaining story, but some among the listeners clearly saw the points made by Jesus. God- and His Son- the King- invite first the chosen people- the people of Israel. Many refuse to come. The invitation is then given to "all"…which would include the Gentiles- a radical notion in that day as well as today among many Orthodox Jews. If we attend without preparation, without putting our hearts right with God- and simple want to "join the party" without any commitment to the Master, we will also be rejected!



The teachers of the law, the religious leaders and experts in the Law (God's Law) constantly tried to trap Jesus. They hoped they could discredit Him with His own words. Little did they know that they were contending with God Himself! They asked Jesus: *"Is it right to pay the imperial tax to Caesar or not?"* (Matt 22:17). Jesus knew their trickery and deceit, coming from the evil in their hearts. So he told them to show Him a coin and asked: *"Whose image is this? And whose inscription?"* (Matt 22:20). When they answered "Caesar's" (Matt 22:21), Jesus then told them to give Caesar what was his and God what was His (which is, of course, everything!). This answer was not simple sophistry- Jesus was forcing them to look not only at the evil desires in their hearts- to discredit Him and therefore reject him, but also at the natural divisions that we observe in our daily lives. We find this same sentiment the Preacher/Teacher (Ecclesiastes 3:1) who taught that there is a time for everything- even for giving tax money. I am certain that this activity was almost as popular then as now. Once the "religious leaders" saw their trap to be a failed attempt, they were "amazed" and "went away" (Matt 22:22).

Exodus 31-33 February 3, 2014 Matthew 22:23-46

Bezalel was one of the very few to receive the "Spirit of God" (Ex 31:2) outside of the prophets and an occasional king (Saul and David). God's special gift to him was not given to make him feel superior but to enable him to perform his craft in a manner suiting the Creator of the universe! This is one of the reasons God shares His spirit with us- to equip us to serve in ways that are befitting to a king!

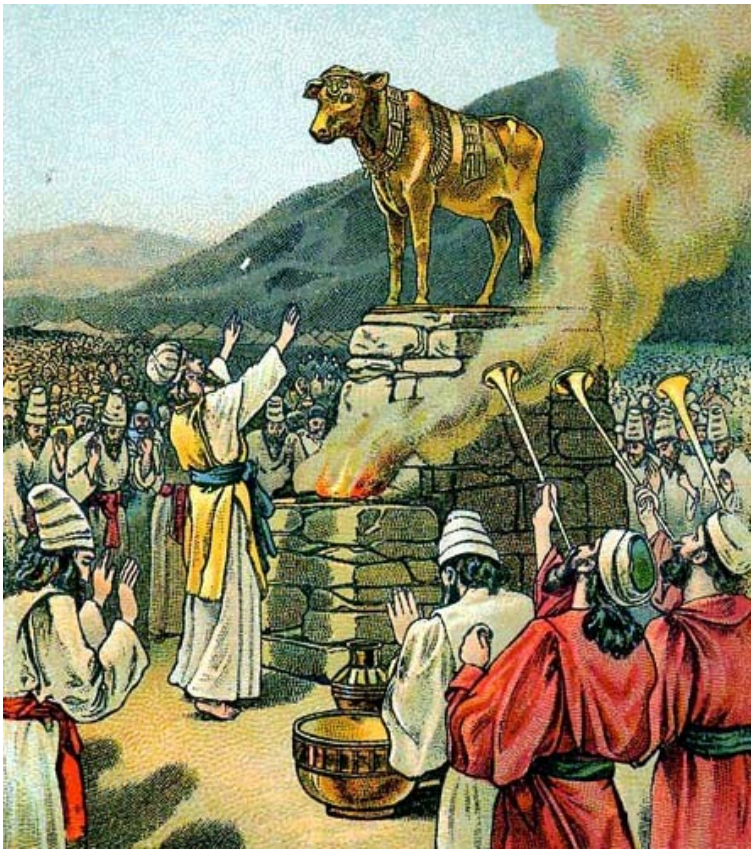
The Sabbath was given as a sign and a gift- a sign of the special bond- the covenant- between God and man, and a gift, since God Himself "rested" on the seventh day and so set the example for us to "rest". It is hard to imagine this concept in the setting of a society that treats Sunday as essentially "another work day". Businesses that are closed on Sunday are the rare exception rather than the rule anymore. Christian people think nothing of shopping, mowing a lawn (or shoveling snow) or doing any of a myriad of other "ordinary" activities on the Lord's Day. What a blessing and a gift we miss by not accepting this gift from our Creator.

After setting the ordinances and rules for the Sabbath, God then gave Moses another gift- the commandments on two stone tablets. These were (or a subsequent version at least) to find their way into the Ark of the Covenant, the most sacred and holy place of all.

God's people were very impatient (in addition to being "stiff necked")- they wondered where Moses was and decided not to wait on him, but instead said: "Come, make us gods who will go before us. As for this fellow Moses who brought us up out of Egypt, we don't know what has happened to him." (Exodus 32:1). Remember the gold (and silver) the Egyptians gave so freely to the Hebrew people before they left Egypt? Some of this gold was then fashioned into a golden calf- an idol. The people were delighted with this as said: "These are your gods, Israel, who brought you up out of Egypt." (Ex 32:4).

God is, of course, aware of this blatant violation of the first commandment, and says to Moses: "Go down, because your people, whom you brought up out of Egypt, have become corrupt. 8 They have been quick to turn away from what I commanded them and have made themselves an idol cast in the shape of a calf. They have bowed down to it and sacrificed to it and have said, 'These are your gods, Israel, who brought you up out of Egypt.' (Ex 32:7-8). God is so angry that he threatens to "destroy them" and then make them (or re-make them) into a "great nation" (Ex 32:10). God is considering a complete "do over" for His people, but Moses pleads with God and reminds Him that other nations will see God's destruction. Furthermore, God had made a lasting covenant with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob not only that they would survive but thrive! The Lord God relented, and Moses then "went down" to his people with the tablets containing the Law.

The scene at the bottom of the mountain was tumultuous…what Joshua though was "the sound of war" was actually "the sound of singing" (Ex 32:17-18). Moses was furious- at the people for their impatience and unfaithfulness to God's Law, and especially at Aaron who allowed the situation to get out of control so quickly. Aaron's apology is self-serving- he blames the people and how "prone these people are to evil" (Ex 32:22). The line is drawn in verse 26 "Whoever is for the Lord, come to me. ". And the Levites (and probably others) came to Moses. Moses then ordered the killing of the unfaithful ones, such that "three thousand of the people died" that very day (Ex 32:28). Yet God blessed those who remained faithful, as He does with us today! The reprieve for those who sinned, and were not killed immediately, was to be brief. God promised to punish them, and did so with a plague (Ex 32:35).



God is still so angry with His people that He decides to send an “angel” before them on their travels to the Promised Land, but will not go with them Himself. (Ex 33:2-3). It is a sign to me that God’s people were truly sorry for their abandonment of God and idol worship that they ”began to mourn” (Ex 33:4). Sorrow for sin is not the same as repentance (turning from sin), but for many of us it is a necessary first step.

Moses then sets up a “Tent of Meeting” where he goes to commune with God. “The Lord would speak to Moses face to face, as one speaks to a friend.” (Ex 33:11). Moses would return to the camp, but Joshua would remain behind in the tent. Already God was preparing and shaping this wonderful young man Joshua to be a leader of God’s people! During these conversations, Moses was able to convince God to “go before” His people as they traveled to their ultimate destination. During this set of interchanges, Moses asks God to reveal Himself- in all His glory. God agrees to do so, but warns Moses that He cannot reveal His face, because one cannot see the face of God and live! (Ex 33:20) Moses is told he can see God from a “cleft in the rock”(Ex 33:21) but that God will allow Moses only to see “His back” (Ex 33:23).

Matthew 22:23-46

It has always seemed contradictory to me that the Sadducees- who did not believe in the resurrection of the dead- would ask Jesus about marriage in the Resurrection. The Sadducees are “sad, you see” because they don’t look forward to the Resurrection! Jesus answer shows them clearly that their question only reveals their ignorance “At the resurrection people will neither marry nor be given in marriage;

they will be like the angels in heaven. But about the resurrection of the dead—have you not read what God said to you, 'I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob'? He is not the God of the dead but of the living." (Matt 22:30-32). Although the people were "astonished" at His teaching, the enemies of Jesus were almost certainly upset at being "shown up" by this (so they thought) uneducated teacher.

And now some politics is evident. The Pharisees, who thought their knowledge of the Law was superior to the Sadducees, then asked Jesus what the "greatest commandment" was. They should have known the answer- and might have known the answer, but their intent was not their own enlightenment but to trap or humiliate Jesus. They had no idea that they were- like Jacob- literally wresting with God! Jesus' answer is simple and profound: "'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.' This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments." (Matt 22:37-39).

Jesus then does what is to me at least, one of my favorite things. In the rabbinical tradition, he answers a question with another question, to show mastery and understanding of the answer. After answering the question about the greatest commandment, He then asks them "Whose son is the Messiah?" (Matt 33:41 paraphrased). The obvious answer is given "The Son of David". The Scripture teaches clearly that the Messiah will be (among many other things) descended from David. Jesus then asks an excellent question- "How is it then that David, speaking by the Spirit, calls him 'Lord'? For he says, "'The Lord said to my Lord: "Sit at my right hand until I put your enemies under your feet."' If then David calls him 'Lord,' how can he be his son?" (Matt 33:43-45). What the Pharisees did not realize, and that Jesus did realize, was that He was BOTH- the "son" and the "Lord". David's physical descendant was the Lord of the Universe! How blind were the "wise"…and how blind they still are.

Exodus 34-6 February 4, 2014 Matthew 23:1-22

God is the God of second chances- and third and fourth chances. Here, Moses and the people receive a second set of stone tablets to replace the first which were destroyed in righteous anger. This time Moses himself does the writing (Ex 34:28). God repeats His warnings about making treaties with the enemies that now live in the lands God has promised (Ex 34:15-16). If the people intermarry, they will be tempted by foreign gods, just as Solomon was to be later in this story of God's people.

Moses "inherited" some of God's own radiance simply by being in His presence. We too, when in the presence of the almighty God, "shine" as lights to others (Matthew 5:16). We are to be light, and salt, and leaven. In order to remove some of the fear the people had, Moses used a veil to cover his face until the time came for Moses to again speak with the Lord- face –to-face. (Ex 34:35).

Once again we see that Bezalel and Oholiab appointed to be the chief craftsmen for the construction of the Tabernacle/Tent. Instead of offering gold to be made into the Calf Idol, the people then offered gold to be as a "wave offering" to God, to be incorporated into the very structure of the Temple/Tent (Ex 35:22). Every beautiful and precious thing specified to be used in the Tabernacle/Tent was brought, in fact the generosity of God's people was such that they were "restrained from bringing

more” (Ex 35:36). It is a beautiful and amazing sight when God’s people give from the heart- there is always an abundance- for God is the God of abundance. I am reminded of my favorite church sign/name I saw recently near Stone Mountain, GA. The name of the church was the “Abundant Rain Empowerment Church”. Someday I hope to visit them and tell them how inspiring their name is to me!

And so the Temple/Tent was made- lovingly, carefully and out of the abundant generosity of God’s people. Every direction from God was followed exactly, a testimony to the love and dedication of God’s own people toward their magnificent Deliverer and Promise Keeper.

Matthew 23:1-22

Hypocrisy is one of the enemies of God’s people. It comes from the Greek word “hypokrisis” which means “play acting”. Hypocrisy occurs when we PRETEND to be righteous, or convince ourselves that we are truly righteous, when the opposite is true. The Scripture is clear about this (1 John 1:8)- we are liars if we claim we are “without sin”. WE are all sinners who have fallen short of the glory of God (Rom 3:23). Jesus taught that the “teachers of the law” were guilty of this sin (Matt 23:2). They taught the truth, so the Law must be followed, but they themselves were not examples of a godly and obedient life (Matt 23:2). Everything is “about them”- since they constantly seek attention, the most favorable and important places, and wish to be greeted with respect (Matt 23:7). Jesus told His followers that they were not to be called “Rabbi”, for there is only one Teacher- God Himself. Nor were any to be called “father” or “instructor”, since God is the ultimate and true Father and Instructor. He then cautions us about “exalting” ourselves- warning us that we would be humbled (Matt 23:12). This lesson is a hard one for me, since I like to think of myself as father, instructor, and worthy of a title. In truth, neither I nor anyone is truly “deserving” of anything but God’s anger- we are blessed to receive

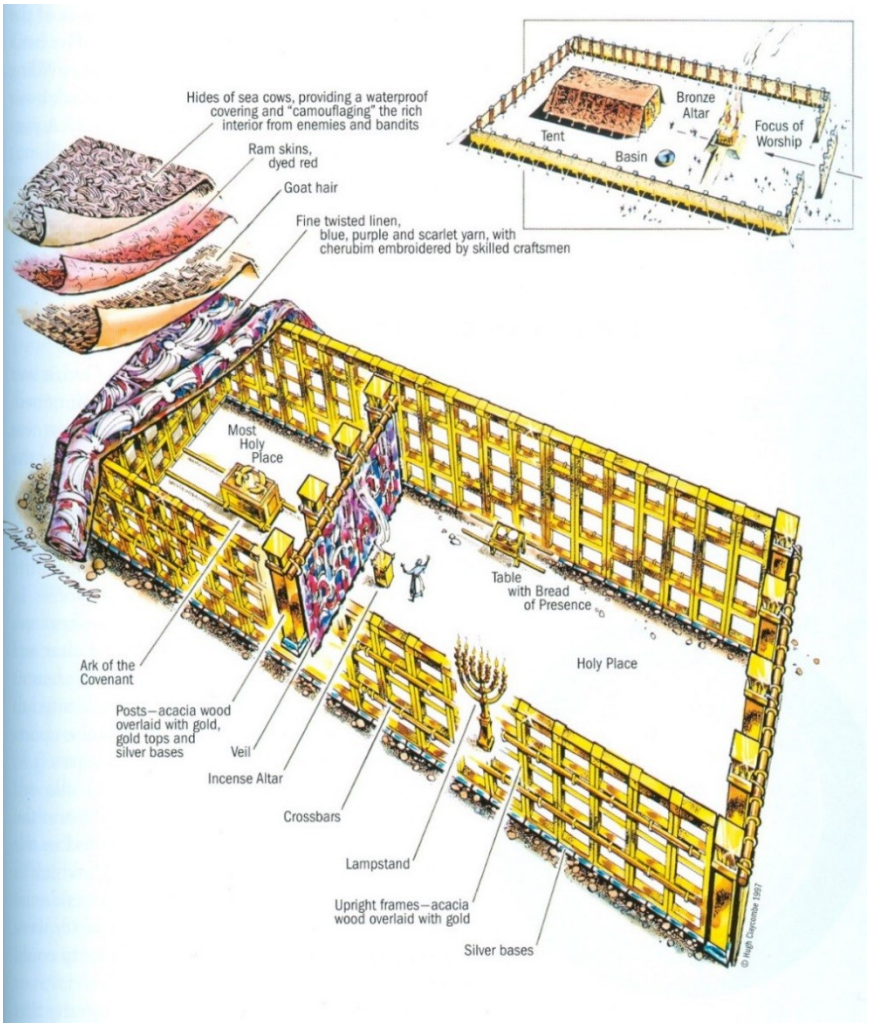
His (underserved) grace. The heart of a servant is one that constantly honors and pleases God.

Jesus then starts a long teaching on the “woes” of the Pharisees and teachers of the law (Matt 23:13). The first woe is obstruction. The teacher are seen by God as “standing in the door” and not entering, and also preventing others from entering. We can easily suppose that Jesus is speaking here about entry to the very Kingdom of God- a constant topic of teaching, sermons and parables of Jesus. The second woe is the practices of proselytization- winning of converts. Jesus describes the methods of these teachers in this way: ” You travel over land and sea to win a single convert, and when you have succeeded, you make them twice as much a child of hell as you are.” (Matt 23:15). Then the third woe is described- swearing not by Heaven or the Temple or the altar in the Temple itself, but by the offering placed on the altar of the Temple or the gold of the Temple. One can only wonder if the values of the Pharisees and other teachers of the law) had become so materialistic that they valued the money or “gold” more than anything else. Certainly they missed the mark as to what makes something sacred- that is the very presence of God Himself as symbolized by the Temple or the altar!

Exodus 37-38 February 5, 2014 Matthew 23:23-39

The Ark and the table were made of acacia wood, as was the altar of incense. The lampstand was pure gold. The design of the lampstand is a reminder of Aaron’s staff- made of almond wood and bearing flowers. (Ex 37:17-23). The design became a symbol of the Light from God and God’s Word, and is stylized into the modern menorah. The almond wood was also used in Aaron’s , which miraculously budded “Aaron's staff, which was a piece of almond wood, miraculously budded, bloomed, and produced almonds, indicating that God chose him as high priest. (Numbers 17:8) That rod was later put inside the ark of the covenant, which was kept in the tabernacle holy of holies, as a reminder of God's faithfulness to his people.” (http://christianity.about.com/od/Tabernacle/fl/Golden-Lampstand.htm).

The Altar of Offering and the Wash Basin also used bronze- and overlay for the acacia wood altar (to make it fireproof) and bronze from mirrors of the female attendants at the entrance of the Tent of Meeting (Ex 38:8). Curtains made of twisted linen defined the four courtyards (Ex 38:9). Materials used reflect the abundance and generosity of God- more than 29 talents of gold In today’s dollars, a talent of gold (about 33 kg) has a value of approximately $660,000. (http://simple.wikipedia.org/wiki/Talent_(weight)). 100 talents of silver were also used in construction, as well as 70 talents of bronze. What a reminder to the people each day of the generosity and provision of God- since all these metals were “donated” to the Hebrew people from the people of Egypt!



Matthew 23:23-39

The "woes" of the Pharisees continue. The teacher of the law prescribed tithing- and tithed "everything" down to the spices they used each day- but neglected "… the more important matters of the law—justice, mercy and faithfulness." (Matt 23:23). The Pharisees "cleaned the outside" of the dish but not the inside (Matt 23:25-26). The next "woe" describes the Pharisees as "whitewashed tombs"- beautiful on the outside but full of decay on the inside! (Matt 23:27-28). The last of seven "woes" describes the practice of building tombs "for the prophets" and decorating the "graves of the righteous" (Matt 23:29).

Jesus then describes the Pharisees as "snakes" who will not escape "being condemned to hell." (Matt 23:33). Jesus then describes the fate of the godly persons sent to them- they are killed and crucified, flogged and pursued "from town to town" (Matt 23:34). All the blood of these righteous people, says Jesus, will come upon them (Matt 23:36).

Then follows a heartfelt lament for Jerusalem. Jesus prophesies that He will not return to that city until the people of Jerusalem declare "'Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.". (Matt 23:39).

Exodus 39,40 February 6, 2014 Matthew 24:1-22

Blue, purple and scarlet yarn- all symbols of royalty and "kingship"- were used in the temple/tent of meeting garments. These are a tribute to the King of Kings Himself! So often we are 'careless" in our worship- we are so casual that we forget that we are in the very presence of God Himself!

Following in Exodus 39 are descriptions of the ephod, the breast piece and other priestly garments (Ex 39:2-31). Each item has carefully designated specifications, a reflection of the specific demands that God makes on His people. We are to "love", but in a given day we are to "love a specific person"- perhaps one we find unlovely, hard to love and "undeserving" of out love and attention. And yet love and obey we must to stay in God's perfect will!

Moses then inspects all the work the skilled craftsmen and assistants have done. He found "they had done it just as the Lord had commanded. So Moses blessed them." (Ex 39:43). Blessings will come to us when we follow the specifics of God's instructions and commands!

The Tabernacle is then set up, again following God's specific directions…and Moses also set up the Courtyard surrounding the Tabernacle (Ex 40:1-33). Then an amazing and wonderful thing happened- the "Glory of the Lord" filled the Tabernacle (Ex 40:34). We see a similar occurrence when Solomon builds and blesses the Temple in Jerusalem (2 Chron 7:1). The presence of God was so overwhelming that Moses "could not enter" (Ex 40:35). I wonder if my God is "that big"? Is my God able to "fill His temple" with His presence? Or do I simply not see or experience what is clearly a reality before me each day?

Once again, we see how clearly God is WITH His people- traveling with them as a "cloud" by day and a "fire in the cloud" by night. God is with us when we follow Him- and even when we don't! (Ex 40:36-38).

Matthew 24:1-22

End times…how often we speculate on "what will happen"…will there be a Great Tribulation? Will we be raptured away and spared the great suffering we see in Revelation. How will the Messiah come? Who is the antichrist? Jesus knew His disciples were also interested in "the outcome" of so many things- probably in part because they still believed that Jesus might become an earthly king, despite His many statements to the contrary. And so as Jesus left the Temple, he remarked to His disciples ""Truly I tell you, not one stone here will be left on another; every one will be thrown down." (Matt 24:2). This in fact was a prophesy that came true very soon after Jesus' Resurrection. After the revolt of the Zealots against Rome (70 AD), the victorious Roman soldiers tossed the stones from the Temple walls into the streets below.

There will be "famines" and "the love of most will grow cold" (Matt 24:7;12). False prophets (Matt 24:11) will deceive many people. It will be an agonizing time for God's people. There is, however, a great hope: "If those days had not been cut short, no one would survive, but for the sake of the elect those days will be shortened." (Matt 24:22). Our hope (that is, the hope of the "elect") is that the suffering will be cut short. Some believe that this "cutting short" is from the

Rapture (1 Thes 4:17). Whatever it is, we are given the assurance that we will not face anything that God will not give us the grace and strength to endure.

Stones from Western Wall of the Temple.

Leviticus 1-3 February 7, 2014 Matthew 24:23-51

Offerings…tithes…giving to the Lord. What should our attitude be? Are we giving out of duty, guilt or obligation? Surely God commanded – not suggested- that we give a tithe. Easy enough to figure in the decimal system- just move the decimal one place to the left! The Scriptural standard is given in 2 Cor 9:7 "…God loves a cheerful giver." One of my beloved former pastors, Dr. Frank Runble Sr. stated that giving should be "a hilarious experience". In this case, hilarious means "filled with joy and gladness" and might lead to "laughing out loud" which is what my brother Jonathan thought it meant (but he was only 6 at the time!).

If we give with gladness in our heart, we realize that it is a blessing and an honor to share in God's kingdom building, ministering to the poor, the hungry, the thirsty, the oppressed and disadvantaged! God specified three offering: 1) a burnt offering (Lev 1:3-17); 2) the grain offering (Lev 2:1-16); and 3) the fellowship offering (Lev 3:1-17). The burnt offering was to be "a male without defect" (Lev 1:3) and was consumed by the fire, making "an aroma pleasing to the Lord" (Lev 1:9,17). The

grain offering was partly consumed by fire, and the remainder used as part of the priests' food (Lev 2:2-3). The grain offering must be made "without yeast" (Lev 2:11) and "with salt" (Lev 2:13) The fellowship offering was a male or female animal without defect (Lev 3:1) which could either be a lamb (Lev 3:7) or a goat (Lev 3:12). Specifications are given as to how the animal is to be slaughtered, and the fatty portions and internal organs are to be burned. Presumably, the rest of the animal could then be eaten. This act of worship ties the ordinary- eating of meals- with the extraordinary- being in God's presence and honoring His directions and commands.

Matthew 24:23-51

Jesus' description of the "end of days" continues. False prophets will appear and some will believe that they are the Messiah (Matt 24:23-25). In a fascinating passage, Jesus describes the appearance of the Son of Man as like the appearance of lightning (Matt 24:27). Lightning is a brilliant flash of energy that travels at amazing speed, seemingly going where it will. The appearance of Jesus at the Second Coming will certainly be dramatic! Jesus tells them that the signs of His coming will be given (Matt 24:32-35). The Jesus says something to us that should help us avoid those who claim to know when He will return. Jesus says that only the Father knows that time, not even the Son (Matt 24:36). If the Son doesn't know, then how could we know? He also tells us to "keep watch" (Matt 24:42), so that we will not be unprepared when He comes. And the best way to "keep watch" is to live a life of faithful obedience and love, a life filled with prayer and gratitude to the One who gave us abundant and eternal life!

Jesus goes on to say we should be "faithful and wise" like the good servant described in Matthew 24:45-47. The wicked will mock Him and think they can "get away with" disobedient and rebellious behavior. Their end is one of "weeping and gnashing of teeth" (Matt 24:51). Our actions DO have consequences, despite what those in the "modern enlightened" era tell us.

Leviticus 4-6 February 8, 2014 Matthew 25:1-30

Sin offering, guilt offering, gain offering…are these all just remnants of the past sacrificial system, or do the specifications and regulations for these offerings still hold valuable truths for us today. Certainly any offering that is manmade is only a shadow or a faint copy of the Great Offering our Father made for us…of His very Son! Jesus paid the price for us "once and for all" (Heb 10:10). The first part of Hebrews 10 explains why all these sacrifices described here, however sincerely offered, were insufficient and were used by God to teach us the seriousness and gravity of sin. Hebrews 10:4 plainly states "It is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins.". But the blood that was sacrificed point clearly to the blood of God's Lamb- the Lamb that takes away the sins of the world (John 1:29). Even unintentional sin is taken seriously and must be atoned for (Lev 4:13).

Matthew 25:1-30

Jesus tells a series of parables- the Ten Virgins, the Bags of Gold, and the Sheep and the Goats. In all of these stories/parables He is describing the Kingdom life that He is Himself bringing into the world. The story of the ten virgins is a wedding story- the ten young girls are to await the coming of the bridegroom, who appears at midnight. Some of them are described in Scripture as "wise" (Matt 25:2,4) since they were prepared and ready for the excitement to come- some- an equal number- were "foolish" and did not prepare by having enough oil for their lamps. The bridegroom appears and the five unprepared girls are frantically looking for oil- and find themselves shut out of the wedding celebration. We who are careless and slow to engage in a true life in the Spirit and waste our time with less important things will be like the five foolish girls- unprepared and frantically trying to make up for our own misjudgments and wasted time. Jesus' teaching here is timeless and clear ""Therefore keep watch, because you do not know the day or the hour." (Matt 25:13). We hope that the Lord will truly "find faith" when He returns (Luke 18:8). The parable of the bags of gold is particularly hard to take for those who believe in "equalization of income" or income redistribution. The Scripture makes it clear that each servant was given an amount of money "according to their ability" (Matt 25:15). The distribution was apparently accurate, for the servant who receive only one bag of gold proved his ineptitude and fear of the "hard man" (Matt 25:25) that was his master- he simply buried it! The master's rebuke is both stinging and accurate "You wicked, lazy servant! So you knew that I harvest where I have not sown and gather where I have not scattered seed? Well then, you should have put my money on deposit with the bankers, so that when I returned I would have received it back with interest." (Matt 25:26-27). Jesus is trying to get us to see and realize that we are given treasure- gifts and graces as well as the power of His Spirit. Our proper response is not of fear, but of investing- not only our gifts and graces but also ourselves. When we give ourselves totally to the tasks set before us, and trustingly follow God's plan for us- we are blessed with even more

abundance. However, if we fail from fear or mistrust or lack of effort, even the "little" that we have will be taken from us (Matt 25:29).

Leviticus 7-9 February 9, 2014 Matthew 25:31-46

Sacrifices pleasing to God- this was the object of much of the worship of God's people in the system of priests, rituals and specifications that were established. At the end of this part of Leviticus, we see these inspiring words: " Moses and Aaron then went into the tent of meeting. When they came out, they blessed the people; and the glory of the Lord appeared to all the people. Fire came out from the presence of the Lord and consumed the burnt offering and the fat portions on the altar. And when all the people saw it, they shouted for joy and fell facedown." (Lev. 9:23-24).

Two things should be noted in this crowning passage: 1) they joy of the people; 2) their attitude in worship. These are interconnected! True joy in worship comes from lifting up offerings- of our wealth, ourselves, our time and dedication, our prayers, our talents- to God Himself to be used as He sees fit- and according to His will. An attitude of humility comes to God's people as they express their incredible joy in participating with Him in building a Kingdom, an outpost, a colony of heaven itself on the earth. As we pray "Thy will be done on earth…" (Matt 6:10 KJV) we flesh this prayer out with our offerings and dedication to Him alone.

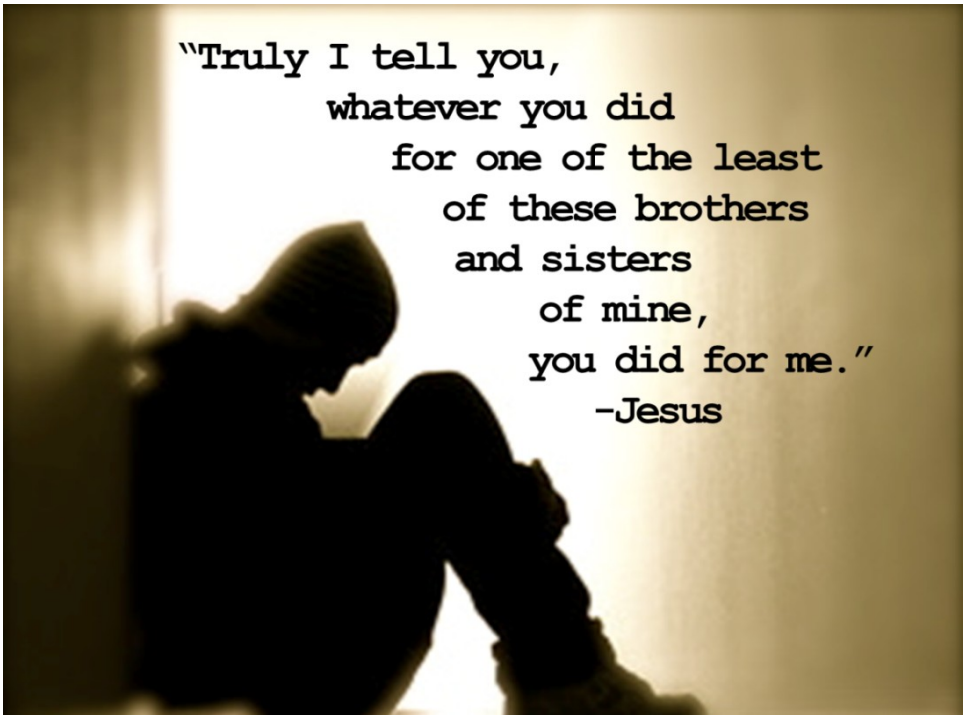
Note that Aaron was required to make a sacrifice for himself, since there was sin in his life that required atonement: "So Aaron came to the altar and slaughtered the calf as a sin offering for himself." (Lev 9:8). The sacrifice of Jesus was given as a sin offering also, but since the blood shed was not required for His sin –there was none- it became available to cover, cleanse, and give forgiveness (not just covering) for OUR sins! I am so appreciative of Dr. Jay Hughes, who pointed this important fact out to the Sunday School class at Salem UMC a few years ago- perhaps the best Bible lesson I have ever heard! What a glorious and freeing truth to embrace!

Matthew 25:31-46

Not "if the Son of man comes in His glory… (capitals are mine)" but "when the Son of Man comes in His glory"! (Matt 25:31). As in the early church, there are many today who doubt His return (2 Peter 3:1-7). Jesus return is solidly based on two things: 1) Jesus very words (matt 16:27 and many others); 2) the prophesy of the Hebrew Scriptures who testify that the throne of David will "endure forever" (Jer 33:17; 2 Sam 7:16; Psalm 89:35-37). Jesus will return as conquering King, the very Lion of Judah- the King that God's people have cried out and longed for since the beginning of the Covenant between God and His people.

The main thing I have always missed in the story/parable is that the sheep and the goats are surprised at the outcome of Jesus' sorting. The true followers which ministered to the hungry, sick, forgotten, unlovely and imprisoned are surprised that they have been ministering to Jesus Himself. The "self-righteous" who neglected the "things of God" are so certain of their final destiny in Heaven that they are astonished that they will not be there. "When did we NOT do these things..?" (Matt 25:45), not realizing that Jesus's people, and Jesus Himself, are found in the "least and the lost", the downtrodden and oppressed, the powerless

and the hungry. And then the great final division takes place- the righteous to eternal life, the “self-rightous” to eternal punishment (Matt 25:46).



Leviticus 10-12 February 10, 2014 Matthew 26:1-19

“Unauthorized fire”…seems like a minor offense! After all, nobody was hurt, no buildings were burned- we’re not talking about arson or pyromania here. And yet when Nadab and Abihu, Aaron’s sons, put incense in the censers and offered incense to the Lord “fire came out from the presence of the Lord and consumed them, and they died before the Lord.” (Lev 10:2). Moses’ words are a reminder of what God said earlier: “‘Among those who approach me I will be proved holy; in the sight of all the people I will be honored.’” (Lev 10:3)- and amazingly, Aaron is silent (Lev 10:4). Some scholars have suggested that there were multiple sins- some deliberate- involved in the actions of these two young men: 1) using “strange fire”- fire that did not come from God; 2) presenting incense when it was the clear duty of Aaron to do so (Lev 9:22-24 and elsewhere in Lev 9); 3) there is a suggestion in Lev 10:9 that the two suns might have been drinking wine when they performed this act. The main problem, it would seem, is that the priests (or his unauthorized representative) was changing the specific expressed will and direction of God for worship.

Apparently the two remaining sons were to take up some of the duties of their deceased brothers. Eleazar and Ithamar were told to ”Take the grain offering left over from the food offerings prepared without yeast and presented to the Lord and eat it beside the altar, for it is most holy.” (Lev 10:12). Moses is still concerned for the sin offering, insisting that it (the goat) should have been eaten in the sanctuary (Lev 10:17). Aaron assures Moses that both the sin offering and burnt offering were made properly, and Moses than “is satisfied” (Lev 10:20).

Leviticus 11 is a tabulation of the “clean and unclean” animals that could be used for food (Lev 11:8,9 ff). The animals that have a divided hoof and chew cud are

clean, all others with a divided hoof (like the pig) are unclean. Some have suggested that these dietary laws were based on the avoidance of disease and parasites as well as the lack of preservation of meats at that time in history. (See http://www.ucg.org/booklet/what-does-bible-teach-about-clean-and-unclean-meats/which-animals-clean-or-unclean/). Also see (http://www.gotquestions.org/animals-clean-unclean.html#ixzz2sMl78Kvv) "In a time period lacking modern food safety regulations and refrigeration, a diet consisting of clean animals would have protected against many health problems." (quote from the website).

A woman just giving birth to a son was ritually unclean for a week (7 days); with a daughter for two weeks (14 days) (Lev 12:2-5). With a son, on the eighth day the son is to be circumcised, followed by a 33 period of purification (Lev 12:3-4). With a daughter the time period is specified as 66 days (Lev 12:5). Then an offering is made of a lamb and a dove, or toe doves if she cannot afford a lamb for a burnt offering and a sin offering, after which she will be declared clean by the priest (Lev 12: 7b-8). It is not totally surprising in a male dominated society (and in a Scripture most likely written by a man) that the purification period for a son is half that for a daughter.

Matthew 26:1-19

How did Jesus know…? He clearly states that He will be "handed over to be crucified." (Matt 26:2) during the Passover Celebration. Jesus certainly knew that He had enemies among the "religious leaders" whom He relentlessly challenged and criticized- often very publically. They were surely smarting from the wounds He had inflicted on them, were likely jealous of His enormous popularity, and saw their positions of privilege and influence threatened. The time for them to act had come, but they were clever and deliberate to avoid too public an encounter. So they plotted and: "they schemed to arrest Jesus secretly and kill him. "But not during the festival," they said, "or there may be a riot among the people." (Matt 26:4-5).

The anointing of Jesus at Bethany has always been a touching story for me. Jesus is at the home of Simon the leper. The Scripture implies that Simon had been cured by Jesus, since lepers were routinely avoided out of religious and medical concerns. The woman who gives Jesus such an extravagant gift has been an inspiration to Jesus' followers for many years- how beautiful it is to do such an extravagant and caring thing for the Lord. Jesus comments that: "what she has done will also be told, in memory of her." (Matt 26:13) despite the objections of some of the disciples (Matt 26:8-9).

Judas then makes his fateful visit to the “chief priests” (Matt 26:14) and asks what the price of betrayal of Jesus would be. Some have suggested that Judas was a Zealot, and that by having Jesus arrested Judas would force Jesus to overcome His enemies and establish Himself as the King of Israel. Some have suggested that he was greedy. John 12:6 states that he sometimes helped himself to some of the money in the common purse. Whatever the reason, Judas stands in history as the prototype of the betrayer. Dante puts Judas and Brutus and Cassius (betrayers of Julius Caesar) in the mouth of the dragon/Satan in the lowest circle of Hell.

The Passover meal is then celebrated…for the last time. Preparations have been made for the “upper room” (Luke 22:12) or Cenade for the celebration. (Matt 22:17-19). The Gospel accounts spend much time describing this event, since it is a key to our understanding of Jesus’ last fellowship with those closest to Him- a time of announcement, of prayer, of instructions for this memorial meal which was to become a centerpiece of Christian worship. Leonardo Da Vinci’s masterpiece depicts the scene as Jesus states that he will be betrayed. So many times I have imagined myself at the table with Him, wondering what all of this meant. I would imagine the disciples felt a range of emotions- from the warm satisfaction of a meal with their Master to the terror and apprehension, and just plain misunderstanding and dread as to what might happen.

Leviticus 13 February 11, 2014 Matthew 26:20-56

The disease of leprosy was greatly feared in the ancient world, as it is now. According to Wikipedia: Leprosy, also known as Hansen's disease (HD), is a chronic infection caused by the bacterium Mycobacterium leprae and Mycobacterium lepromatosis. Leprosy takes its name from the Latin word Lepra, which means "scaly", while the term "Hansen's disease" is named after the physician Gerhard Armauer Hansen.

Leprosy has affected humanity for over 4,000 years, and was recognized in the civilizations of ancient China, Egypt, Israel, and India. Although the forced quarantine or segregation of patients is unnecessary in places where adequate treatments are available, many leper colonies still remain around the world in

countries such as India (where there are still more than 1,000 leper colonies), China, and Japan (although Japan's sanatoriums no longer have active leprosy cases, nor are survivors held in them by law). Leprosy was once believed to be highly contagious and was treated with mercury—all of which applied to syphilis, which was first described in 1530. (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Leprosy).

The Hebrew word used to describe this illness is “tzaraath”. Again, according to Wikipedia: The Hebrew noun tzaraath (Hebrew צרעת [tsaˈʁaʕat], Romanized Tiberian Hebrew ṣāraʿaṯ and numerous variants of English transliteration, including tzaraas, tzaraat, tsaraas and tsaraat) describes disfigurative conditions of the skin and body hair mainly referred to in chapters 13-14 of Leviticus, as well as conditions seemingly equivalent to mildew on clothing and houses.

Tzaraath affects both animate and inanimate objects; the Hebrew Bible discusses tzaraath that afflicts humans, clothing and houses.(http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tzaraath).

Ritual cleansing and examiniation by a priest was required for the afflicted person to rejoin their people. While afflicted and “unclean” the person was required to live separate from the camp and warn others (Lev 13:45-46).

Since tzaraath can affect both animate and inanimate objects, a distinction was made between common mildew or mold and this disease. Certainly these were issues with a nomadic people. When woven material is stored, or put away wet, it is susceptible to mildew or mold formation. Molds are fungi, as is mildew.

The summary of this chapter of Scripture says it best: “These are the regulations concerning defiling molds in woolen or linen clothing, woven or knitted material, or any leather article, for pronouncing them clean or unclean.” (Lev 13:59).

Matthew 26:20-56

Betrayal- and by one of the inner circle of disciples. How shocking and yet in some ways, how predictable. The disciples made Jesus “in their own likeness” as we often do. Good evidence for this is their continued refusal to believe Jesus when he told them three times that he was to be crucified by His enemies. The brothers James and John asked, or had their mother ask Jesus for places at “His right hand” (Matt 20:21). The translation in Mark 10:37 refers to the brothers James and John sitting with Jesus “in His glory”. The betrayal of Judas has been the subject of intense speculation. In the end, however, we can simply say that he was part of the process that led to God’s final answer for sin- the sacrificial offering of God’ Son for us!

It is heartbreaking to imagine the feelings of sorrow and at least some surprise as they pled with Jesus “Surely you don’t mean me, Lord?” (Matt 26:22). And yet Jesus knew- He plainly stated “The one who has dipped his hand into the bowl with me will betray me. The Son of Man will go just as it is written about him. But woe to that man who betrays the Son of Man! It would be better for him if he had not been born.” (Matt 26:23b-24). Judas, probably out of guilt and attempted deception (of the other disciples) then says: “Surely you don’t mean me, Rabbi?” (Matt 26:25) and Jesus’ answer is both telling and cryptic “You have said so”. Jesus, being God, knew the hearts of men and the deepest secrets of their hearts were plain and obvious to Him. Jesus knew that He must continue with the meal, even though it was likely His last with His inner circle. He offers his body and blood “poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.” (Matt 26:28). They then sang a hymn. I have often wondered what they sang together….maybe someday I will ask!

The betrayal did not end with Judas. Peter, the very “rock” that Jesus depended on so many times. Jesus had just stated the “you will all fall away because of me” (Matt 26:31- quoting Zecheraih 31:7). And yet Peter states emphatically ““Even if all fall away on account of you, I never will.” (Matt 26:33). He would be, according to his own words, the “last man standing”! Yet Jesus knows Peter’s heart as well. Jesus tells the strong an impetuous fisherman that ““this very night, before the rooster crows, you will disown me three times.” (Matt 26:34). Peter and the disciples still insist that they would all dies for Him (Matt 26:35).

Jesus then goes to pray, along with Peter, James and John (the two sons of Zebedee Matt 26:36). They could not even keep watch with Jesus an hour- he found them asleep after His heartfelt and agonized prayer to His Father God. (Matt 26:40-41). Jesus tell them to pray that they not “fall into temptation” (Matt 26:41). Was Jesus also praying in the same way for Himself? Surely he was tempted to avoid the terrible suffering and humiliation that was certain to come. He had more than likely seen crucifixions, and was aware of the terrible suffering that went with them. And yet, His prayer was the prayer that we must all pray “may your will be done.”. This is, to me, the “hinge of history”. Everything before Jesus’ agreement with the Father to willingly undergo a terrible death is the history BEFORE, and everything subsequent to that heartfelt prayer is AFTER. Before the prayer, man was wallowing in unforgiven sin, and only sin “covering” was available. Only by God’s grace and the limited giving of the Holy Spirit was mankind even in a survival mode. The Law must be kept perfectly for perfect righteousness, yet nobody could perfectly keep the Law of God. But now, everything is changed- the sacrifice will be soon realized and His blood applied so that all who call on Him “will be saved” (Rom 10:9 and 13).

Note that Jesus prayed the same prayer three times. Surely the Scriptures are reminding us of the key importance of that prayer of obedience and submission to the Father’s will. Them, finding the disciples sleeping (again) he simply tells them: “Rise! Let us go! Here comes my betrayer!” (Matt 26:46). Jesus was then arrested, betrayed by a kiss (Matt 26:49). Much has been made of Jesus’ statements at His arrest. Jesus has just stated that He could prevent His arrest and trial by summoning “legions of angels” (Matt 26:53). But the Jesus states: “But how then would the Scriptures be fulfilled that say it must happen in this way?” (Matt 26:54). Later He states:” this has all taken place that the writings of the prophets might be fulfilled.” (Matt 26:56).

A very famous book was written by the British Bible scholar Hugh Schonfield, which outlines Schonfield's theory about Jesus' motives and methods to "appear" to be the Messiah. Among the tenets of the book were that Jesus did not die during the crucifixion, but was put into a drug induced coma and then (under the protection of Joseph of Arimathea) secretly nursed back to life and health. Jesus, according to Schonfield, knew the prophetic Scriptures very well and did many things "according to the script" to add to His credibility as Messiah. Among the many weaknesses in this theory are: 1) the brutality of Jesus' treatment before the crucifixion- he was certainly in shock and experience massive blood loss, 2) the experience of the Roman executioners – although not medically trained, they were very familiar with crucifixion and death and would be unlikely to mistake a coma for death, and perhaps more importantly 3) the lack of control Jesus had over His early life. How could He as an infant, convince His parents to journey where they did- exactly in accordance with the Scriptures? How could He have selected his "home town" or His place of birth? To me, it takes more faith to believe this fanciful story than to simply believe the truth! Besides, I (and many others) know that He is alive, because He lives in and through me- remaking me from within! (2 Cor 5:17)

Leviticus 14 February 12, 2014 Matthew 26:57-75

The summary of this chapter is given in the last verse (Lev 14:56): "These are the regulations for defiling skin diseases and defiling molds." The entire chapter refers to the practices and procedures for evaluation of persons and objects that were contaminated (were "unclean") and the ritual purification and offerings required after the priest's examination. One usually wonders what relevance, if any, these laws and regulations have to the modern era, where disinfection and evaluation and treatment of all kinds of disease- including skin disease- is a common practice. Do we really expect- and are we expected by God- to follow these rules?

It is convenient to state “these were the Old Covenant, we now live in the New Covenant with freedom in Christ.” Yet Jesus Himself stated: ““Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them.” (Matthew 5:17). Paul states in his letter to the Christians at Rome: “Love does no harm to a neighbor. Therefore love is the fulfillment of the law.” (Rom 13:10). So which is it? Certainly we must wrestle with this, so that we can be, as Paul described: “doers of the law” and not simply hearers (Rom 2:13 KJV) and therefore just (or justified).

Matthew 26:57-75

So now Jesus is before His accusers, in a nighttime trial that is called in haste. The accusers knew that a trial during daylight or in public would bring outcries from the people, since many were convinced that He was at least a wonderful teacher. Some were convinced that He was the Messiah! So the trial began under the direction of Caiphus, the high priest. Peter followed but kept a careful distance (Matt 26:58). Was Peter already reconsidering his declaration that he would follow Jesus, even if it meant his life? (Matt 25:35) In violation of Jewish law, “false witnesses” were brought forward (Matt 26:60). Their testimonies did not agree! The final false witness- from two persons, accused Jesus of threatening to destroy the Temple (Matt 26:61)- although Jesus stated that he would rebuild it “in three days”.

When asked to respond to this accusation, Jesus was silent. Many feel this is in fulfillment of the prophesy in Isaiah (Isa 53:5,7). Then the final challenge was made: “I charge you under oath by the living God: Tell us if you are the Messiah, the Son of God.” (Matt 26:63). What could Jesus do? He now must answer truthfully- and in this case the truth was a stinging rebuke to those gathered in judgment to Him: ““You have said so,” Jesus replied. “But I say to all of you: From now on you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven.” (Matt 26:64). The time is finally right for Jesus to make a public declaration of His Messianic - there is no longer a need for “stealth”. It is, in fact rare when Jesus declared or revealed His true identity in public (and not to the disciples). He reveals Himself only a few times before this in public- notable to the Samaritan woman at the well (John 4:26). I have always thought that Jesus was careful about publicly declaring He was the Messiah since He had a limited time to reach those who would follow before He finally and inevitable came into deadly conflict with the authorities. Regardless, His declarations in public were few.

Now the religious leaders have what they wanted- a charge worthy of death that would stick- uttered by the accused Himself! They quickly declared His death sentence and began to mock Him (Matt 26:65-68).

Meanwhile Peter has been standing outside in the courtyard, and is “accused” the first time of being “with Jesus of Galilee” (Matt 26:69). And Peter, human to the core, denied this! In the gateway Peter is accused again of being “with Jesus of Nazareth’” (Matt 26:71)- again Peter denied this. A third accusation is made, this time that Peter was surely “one of them” (Matt 26:73) and Peter this time emphatically denied (some translations state “with an oath) that he doesn’t even know Jesus! And then- a rooster crows, and Peter remembers his friend and Master Jesus’ words- and he weeps bitterly (Matt 26:75). I have often wondered if I would claim the Name of the Master if my life, or the lives of those I love, was threatened.

This is certainly a matter for serious meditation and prayer. Are we worthy Name bearers, or worthy image bearers of the One whom God sent?

Leviticus 15-17 February 13, 2014 Matthew 27:1-31

Discharges from the body- certainly not my favorite subject! My favorite “discharge” was my “honorable discharge” from the US Army! These rules are in place for health any hygienic reasons. A little overkill here but certainly the intention is clear- to keep God’s people clean and healthy, and ritually clean so they can fully participate in worship.

Leviticus 16 is the description of the origin of Yom Kippur, the “Day of Atonement” the holiest day of the year for faithful Jews. On the “tenth day of the seventh month” (Lev 16:29) is to be observed a day of “Sabbath rest” (Lev 16:31). This is also the origin of the term “scapegoat” (Lev 16:20-22), the goat who carries all the sins of the people away from them and out into the wilderness (Lev 16:21). Yom Kippur has been described as the “Sabbath of Sabbaths” and is preceded in the tenth month by Rosh Hashanah, the “Jewish New Year” which in Scripture is the Feast of Trumpets. A common greeting on Rosh Hashana is “"*Shanah Tovah*", which in Hebrew is “Have a good year”.

Chapter 17 of Leviticus contains a very serious prohibition against the “eating of blood”: “‘I will set my face against any Israelite or any foreigner residing among them who eats blood, and I will cut them off from the people. For the life of a creature is in the blood, and I have given it to you to make atonement for yourselves on the altar; it is the blood that makes atonement for one’s life. Therefore I say to the Israelites, “None of you may eat blood, nor may any foreigner residing among you eat blood.” (Lev 17:10-12). The blood of each living creature is

a representation of its life- and there is no forgiveness without “shedding of blood”. (Heb 9:22) An important lesson then and now!

Matthew 27:1-31

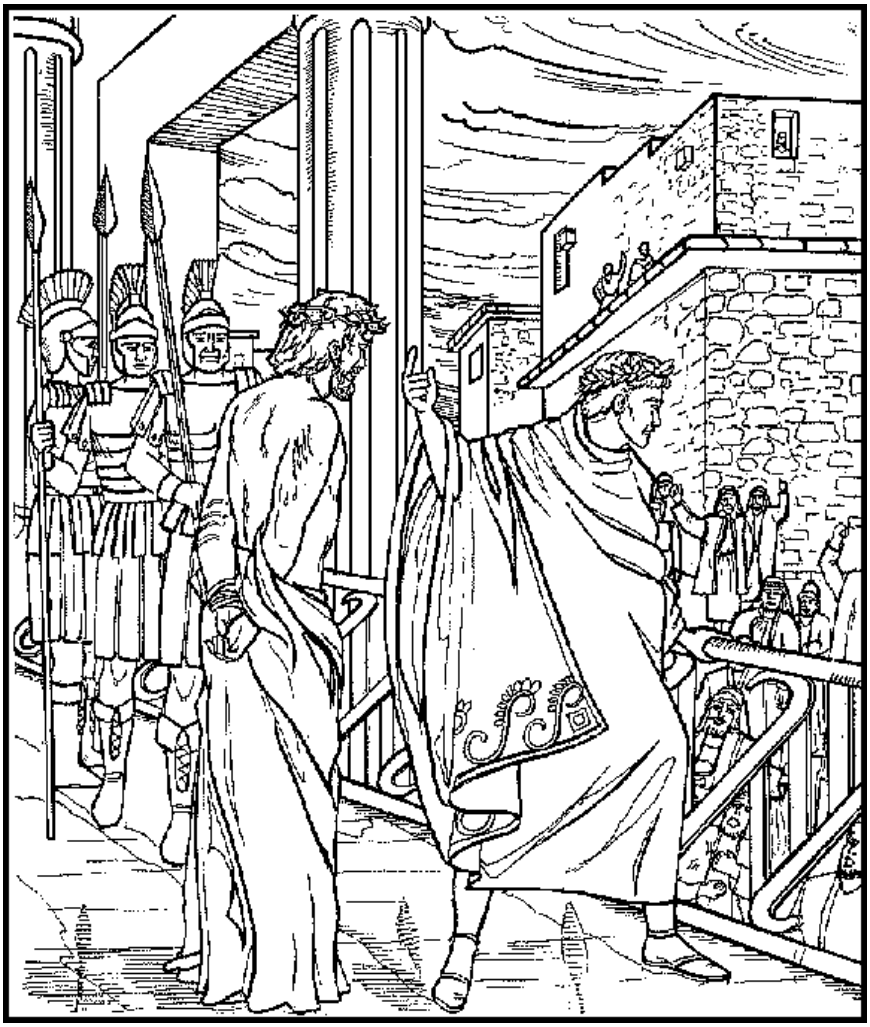
The plan “to have Jesus executed” are now in place (Matt 27:1)! The enemies of Jesus brought Him to the Roman governor, Pilate, who had the authority to pronounce the death sentence. Meanwhile Judas, realizing what he has set in motion, is sorrowful and repentant. He “returned the thirty pieces of silver to the chief priests and the elders.” (Matt 27:3) but it was too late! In a dramatic scene, Judas throws the money into the temple and then hangs himself. He finally realizes that he has “betrayed innocent blood” (Matt 27:4). I can almost feel sorry for this tragic figure- who was used as part of the final chapter of God’s plan to bring redemption into the world through the sacrifice of the Son. Did “Satan enter him”? (John 13;27; Luke 22:3). Was he merely a “pawn” in the deadly “game” that was Jesus’ last week of life? A wonderful sermon on this topic which I recommend is found at (http://www.desiringgod.org/sermons/judas-iscariot-the-suicide-of-satan-and-the-salvation-of-the-world#full-video),

The chief priests took the money that Judas “returned” and bought a plot of ground with it. This was fulfillment of prophesy in Jeremiah and Zechariah (Zech 11:12,13; Jer 19:1-13; 32:6-9). Another detail that Jesus would have had to control if the Passover Plot was to succeed! The impossibility of Jesus having any control over this event is so ludicrous that it essentially disproves the premises of the “Passover Plot”!

Jesus is then taken before Pilate. One of the best (and in some ways most troubling) presentations of the scene was performed by Clyde Annandale, a gifted actor who has written a number of “one person plays” in which he portrays a series of Biblical characters. Pilate was not clear as to the nature of the charges brought against this One’s “he knew it was out of self-interest that they had handed Jesus over to him.” (Matt 27:18)- his wife even begged him not to “have anything to do with this innocent man” (Matt 27:19). Pilate sat in the judgment seat before the people, and great pressure was brought to bear on him. He knew one of his primary responsibilities was to keep the peace in this contentious place. When Pilate asked the crowd to release Jesus (which would have been just) they cried out for His crucifixion. Finally “When Pilate saw that he was getting nowhere, but that instead an uproar was starting, he took water and washed his hands in front of the crowd. “I am innocent of this man’s blood,” he said. “It is your responsibility!” (Matt 27:24) Pilate could only see one way out of his predicament- to literally ‘wash his hands” of this One and those who accused Him. What follows is a statement that has (very unfortunately) been used over the years to justify persecution of God’s people ““His blood is on us and on our children!” (Matt 27:25). This declaration has been the basis of accusing the Jews of being “Christ Killers”. What amazes me is how little the sinful mind and heart of man need to justify sin. Jesus is flogged (a terrible punishment in itself- see “The Passion of the Christ”) and Barabbas is released.

Jesus, now already half dead from the flogging, is tormented and mocked by the Roman soldiers. They cruelly “twisted together a crown of thorns and set it on his

head.” (Matt 27:29), spit on him, struck Him with “the staff” repeatedly (Matt 27:30). Then they led Him away to crucify Him.



Leviticus 18-19 February 14, 2014 Matthew 27:32-66

Unlawful sexual relations are presented in Leviticus 18- a seemingly large list of prohibited relations. God had created mankind male and female, and had prescribed that a man will leave his parent and become united with his wife, and they become “one flesh” (Gen 2:24). Much has been said of late about the rights of persons who are homosexual- whether this lifestyle and sexual practice is sinful or not in God’s eyes and judgment. (Romans 1:26-27; Lev 18:22). The practice of a man having sex with another man “as one does with a woman” is described as detestable (Lev 18:22). Right after this is a description of bestiality as “a perversion” (Lev 18:23). The penalty for doing “these detestable things” is for the person doing such things to be “cut off from their people” (Lev 18:29). These practices are described as “defiling” (Lev 18:30). God warns His people to stay away from these practices, because: “this is how the nations that I am going to drive out before you became defiled.” (Lev 18:24). Despite these clear passages, many so called “scholars” and “experts” have made efforts to undermine their authority. In my view this is simply the sinful mind and heart of man trying to justify a sinful practice. Certainly the church is open to all, and certainly “all have sinned” (Rom

3:23), but we should tolerate this sexual sin no more readily than hate, greed, lying, thievery or murder! All are welcome and all are sinners, but I pray God will cleanse each of us in His perfect way and remake us (2 Cor 5:17) into vessels that are pleasing to Him and that can be used by Him.
Chapter 19 lists additional practices that are forbidden by God and that break our fellowship with Him: respect and honor to parents and observance of the Sabbath (Lev 19:3); avoidance of “metal gods” (Lev 19:4); stealing, lying and deception (Lev 19:11); partiality and slander (Lev 19:15-16); seeking revenge, bearing grudges, and stated positively- loving your neighbor as yourself (Lev 19:18). This is, of course, the source of the Golden Rule that so many think originated with Jesus. Jesus is simply quoting this Scripture! (Matthew 22:39; Mark 12:31; Luke 10:27). Some prohibitions of historical interest are Lev 19:26 and 31. The practice of divination id prohibited. When King Saul later in history consulted a medium to find out the outcome of a battle he was about to fight, he violated this prohibition (1 Sam 28:3 and 7). The chapter closes with prohibitions against “dishonest standards” and prescribes the use of “honest scales and honest weights” (Lev 19:35-36). I am certain that my former colleagues at the National Institutes of Standards and Technology are proud of this Scripture- that is one of their stated charters as an agency! The chapter ends with a simple statement : ““‘Keep all my decrees and all my laws and follow them. I am the Lord.’” (Lev 19:37). God a is saying- “I am God and you are not, so keep my rules and laws”. It kind of reminds me of the Comedian Chevy Chase of Saturday Night Live fame, who said “Good evening. I’m Chevy Chase, and you’re not!”.

Matthew 27:32-66

And so the tragedy of the trial and crucifixion reaches its climax- Jesus is lead away to be crucified at the place of the Skull (Matt 27:33). Simon the Cyrene is compelled to carry Jesus’ cross- presumable since He was so weak from loss of blood He could not carry it. The crossbeam of the “cross” was usually carried to the site of crucifixion, the upright remained in place at the site. Andreas J. Köstenberger (Andreas J. Köstenberger “John” 2004 Page 542) notes that traditional academic reconstruction of the cross has first Jesus, then Simon of Cyrene bear the "stauros," i.e. only the horizontal crossbar, Latin patibulum. Still, a heavy burden for one up all night and flogged almost to the point of death! Jesus was offered gall to drink, presumably to dull the pain He was experiencing.(http://suscopts.org/resources/literature/542/sour-wine-and-gall-was-it-a-merciful-gesture-or-mo/) Above Jesus’ head was a sign identifying Him, a common practice for those crucified. To the left and right were two condemned criminals, identified as “rebels” in Matthew 27:38. He was insulted by those passing by, and also by those being crucified with Him (Matt 27:44). Apparently Jesus’ death came after three hours (Matt 27:45) after which time He “gave up His spirit” (Matt 27:50). Several amazing things occurred at the moment of Jesus’ death: 1) an earthquake; 2) tombs broke open and “many holy people who had died were raised to life.” And were “seen by many”; 3) the curtain of the Temple was torn top to bottom. (Matt 27:51-53). Amazingly, the “Gentile unbeliever” centurion “and those with him” (Matt 27:54) exclaimed that “Surely He was the Son of God”. I will never forget the actor John Wayne- portraying the centurion in the movie (The Greatest Story Ever Told 1965) – uttering these words! The “two Marys” were there at the crucifixion, but only John of all the disciples is mentioned as present.

Joseph of Arimathea offers an unused tomb “cut out of the rock” (Matt 27:59) and has a “large stone” rolled against it to seal it. The “two Marys” were sitting “there opposite the tomb”(Matt 27:61). I wonder what their thoughts were….
Out of concern that the disciples would “fake” a resurrection of Jesus, the chief prists went to Pilate and asked that the tomb be guarded. “Otherwise, his disciples may come and steal the body and tell the people that he has been raised from the dead. This last deception will be worse than the first.” (Matt 27:64). So a guard was posted and a “seal” applied to the tomb (Matt 27:66). This passage about the disciples “stealing Jesus’ body” may have been the source of Hugh Schonfield’s “Passover Plot”. As the Scripture continues, though, we will witness the astounding and surprising power of God over death and Hell! Jesus would rise again, triumphant and having accomplished His mission of redemption. Satan was forever defeated. Satan is, however, a wounded and angry enemy and must be respected.

Leviticus 20-21 February 15, 2014 Matthew 28

Child sacrifice is repugnant to our God. Some question whether He required (or seemed to require) that very sacrifice of Abraham. Many believe Abraham was obedient to God because: 1) he trusted God to provide physical descendants, even though Isaac was a true miracle and was to be the source of the people of God or 2) that God would bring Isaac back from the dead- or perhaps both. There is also the troubling story in Judges 11:31-35 about Jepthah and his daughter. Yet God is very clear in this passage “‘Any Israelite or any foreigner residing in Israel who sacrifices any of his children to Molek is to be put to death. The members of the community are to stone him. I myself will set my face against him and will cut him off from his people; for by sacrificing his children to Molek, he has defiled my sanctuary and profaned my holy name. If the members of the community close their eyes when that man sacrifices one of his children to Molek and if they fail to put him to death, I myself will set my face against him and his family and will cut them off from their people together with all who follow him in prostituting themselves to Molek.” (Lev 20-2b-5). The pagan god Molek did indeed expect human sacrifice, and this was a “snare” to God’s own people.

Among the many other prohibitions and laws in this section, there is this strong statement: “ “‘A man or woman who is a medium or spiritist among you must be put to death. You are to stone them; their blood will be on their own heads.’” (Lev 20:27). God took (and takes) His first commandment seriously- the worship and invitation of “other gods” to be with God’s people is a serious departure from the “set apart” state that God expects of His people. Sin has consequences, for “the wages of sin is death” (Rom 6:23). Yet we are spared from God’s wrath because of the atoning blood of the Savior! We deserve justice (and wrath) we receive mercy!

God then gives rules for the priests. One that has always seemed unusual to me was God’s prohibition against those “less than perfect” physically giving or offering sacrifices to God. As is stated: “No man who has any defect may come near: no man who is blind or lame, disfigured or deformed; no man with a crippled foot or hand, or who is a hunchback or a dwarf, or who has any eye defect, or who has festering or running sores or damaged testicles. (Lev 21:18-20). I wonder if I would be excluded! Yet God seems to be teaching His people a lesson- He is perfection, and that which comes into His presence must also be perfection- complete and without sin. Nowhere is it stated that God does not love these “less than perfect” individuals, but that they are not to enter into sacrificial worship.

Matthew 28

The triumphant verse “He is not here; he has risen, just as he said. Come and see the place where he lay.” (Matthew 28:6) is to me the core of Christian belief! Jesus has truly conquered death- He has defeated Satan and is ready to assume His place as King of Judah! His salvation offer is now ready for all those who will “name His name” and follow Him! Some of the excitement and power of this world changing event is capture in Ron DiCianni’s wonderful mural (below). The two Marys had gone to the tomb, expecting to prepare Jesus’ body for proper burial, now that the Sabbath was over. Instead of a lifeless body, they saw an angle (Matt 28:2-7). So awesome (and fearsome) was the appearance of the angel that the guards :’ were so afraid of him that they shook and became like dead men.” (Matt 28:4). The angel started his conversation with the two women with the words “Do not be afraid” (Matt 28:5). This was similar to the pronouncement made to the shepherds at Jesus’ birth “Fear not” (Luke 2:10 KJV).

The women hurried away from the tomb to tell the disciples what they had seen, both “afraid yet filled with joy” (Matt 28:8). Then, while on their way, they encountered Jesus- who said to them “Greetings!” (Matt 28:9) and then ““Do not be afraid. Go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me.”(Matt 28:10). Jesus’ appearance may have been surprising- even shocking to them- and He certainly knew how to comfort them and dispel their fears. Note that He stated clearly that His brothers in Galilee would “see Him”- they did, and very soon thereafter.

Then starts the “great government and religious cover-up”. The guards, knowing they had failed in their mission and yet knowing how important it was that the events of the morning were “went into the city and reported to the chief priests everything that had happened.”(Matt 28:11). The guards were then paid to tell the false story that “‘His disciples came during the night and stole him away while we were asleep.’ (Matt 28:13). The Scripture reports that “this story” was widely circulated “until this day” (the time the Scriptures were written (Matt 28:15). I often

wondered how eager the guards were to tell this “story”. They knew something supernatural had happened- they knew that the disciples were still scattered and fearful, and yet they colluded with the authorities. Certainly the religious leaders were worried, at least worried enough to try to spread a false story. They knew Jesus’ resurrection would validate His ministry and teachings, and would embolden and energize His followers.

Matthew ends with the dramatic giving of the Great Commission to the disciples. The eleven disciples (minus Judas Iscariot, of course) went “to the mountain” where “they worshipped Him but some doubted” (Matt 28:17). It is amazing to me that some doubt was present at this triumphant point in the disciples’ journey with Jesus. Yet, human nature is like that- we are often pulled away from simple trust and acceptance by a variety of forces- our own insecurities, our fears, and sometimes- the whispers of the Evil One! Jesus promises to be WITH them as they make disciples of “all nations”. Two things are worthy of our note- 1) Jesus is like His Father- he is always accurately described and experienced as the God who is WITH us; 2) Jesus commanded His disciples to “make disciples”- not converts! Discipling takes time and investment of ongoing relationship- but the disciple, once made, will then disciple others! One of the few mentions of the Trinity is in verse 19.

The Resurrection Mural by Ron DiCianni

Leviticus 22-23 February 16, 2014 Mark 1:1-22

“I am the Lord” (Lev 22:2)- a simple yet important centerpiece to this chapter of Leviticus and the Scripture in general. God is stating clearly and simply- so we can understand- that He is to be honored, respected, loved, worshipped, and obeyed. We are NOT God, although it would be more convenient and (we think) easier for us if we were. God’s holiness is so important that an unclean person who comes “near the sacred offerings” must be “cut off from My presence” (Lev 22:3).

God reminds His people of the incident with Aaron’s sons offering “unclean fire” to Him in these words: “‘The priests are to perform my service in such a way that they do not become guilty and die for treating it with contempt. I am the Lord, who makes them holy.” (Lev 22:9). The contempt that was given by Aaron’s sons was met with a direct, unmistakable, and horrific punishment. We may wonder about this seemingly unfair treatment of Aaron’s two sons who were “consumed by fire” (Lev 10:2). The hard lesson is this- God takes sin very seriously- if this disrespect for God were allowed in the priesthood, it would be a serious and lasting influence for evil among God’s people.

Unacceptable sacrifices to the Lord are defined in detail- only the offerings of animals “without defect” (Lev 22:19). We see a somewhat similar situation when David buys the threshing floor of Araunah the Jebusite (this threshing floor is located on Mount Moriah- which is to become the Temple Mount). Araunah offered King David the threshing floor as a gift. David refused, since he planned to make an altar to God at that spot and the narrative describes this event as follows: “But the king replied to Araunah, “No, I insist on paying you for it. I will not sacrifice to the Lord my God burnt offerings that cost me nothing.” (2 Sam 24:24). So David purchased the threshing floor and oxen for “50 shekels of silver”. If we dishonor God by offering that which is “worthless” or of little worth, what have we communicated? We have grudgingly given a little, when God is worthy of all- and all our best! Oswald Chambers shows us this wonderful truth in his beloved devotional book “My Utmost for His Highest”. God finishes this section of instruction with these words:” “Keep my commands and follow them. I am the Lord. Do not profane my holy name, for I must be acknowledged as holy by the Israelites. I am the Lord, who made you holy and who brought you out of Egypt to be your God. I am the Lord.” (Lev 22:31-33).

Leviticus 23 covers the regulations and ordinances for the Festivals of the Jewish calendar- the Festival of Unleavened Bread, of Trumpets (which precedes the Day of Atonement – Rosh Hashanah), and of Tabernacles (Booths), as well as the Sabbath and the Passover. The Offering of First Fruits is described. God’s mercy and provision got the “poor” and outsiders is clearly seen in the prescription for leaving a portion of the harvest for “gleaning”. (Lev 23:22). Each of these is a “lesson in action” for God’s people- by participating in these observances the people are reminded of great truths about God- His deliverance of His people from slavery, His provision through the harvest, His requirements for true repentance from sin- either sins of an individual or of the people collectively. This is a point many of us miss in studying the Hebrew Scriptures. Our modern emphasis of the individual’s relationship to God often causes us to miss the emphasis of the relationship between God and His people as a group.

Mark 1:1-22

Mark’s gospel begins with the strong statement that Jesus is the Messiah and the Son of God that was prophesied by Isaiah (Mark 1:1-3; Isa 40:3). John the Baptists preached repentance and forgiveness of sins. Despite the fact that very few people either understand or desire to truly “repent” of their sins- which involves a radical change in direction in their lives, it is possible that the “forgiveness” part was the draw! John made it clear what his role was- to prepare the way and draw attention to the One to come, who would not baptize “with water” but with the “Holy Spirit” (Mark 1:8).

Mark’s gospel simply states that Jesus “came from Nazareth in Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan.” (Mark 1:9). Jesus alone saw the “heavens open” and the descent of the Holy Spirit as a dove (Mark 1:10). A voice comes from Heaven; it is not clear whether the voice was heard by Jesus alone or by others as well. The voice is affirming of Jesus and His standing with the Father: “ “You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased.” (Mark 1:11). This should certainly discredit those who claim Jesus did not know about His own divinity, or that it was revealed to Him later in His ministry. And the “the Spirit” led Jesus into the wilderness for 40 days. (see also Matthew 4:1-11). Some question this Scripture, comparing it to the passage in James (12:1-16). Yet God (or God’s Spirit) was clearly leading Jesus. My answer to this is that since we pray in the Lord’s Prayer “lead us

not into temptation" (Matt 6:13) then it is certainly possible to be "led" into temptation- but the purpose is for us to learn to resist! Jesus sets the perfect example for us here (and elsewhere!) in that after a 40 day fast He is tempted: 1) to turn stones into bread- or in His ministry to be a "feeder of the masses"; 2) to jump from the spire of the Temple- and therefore be a "miracle worker" in His ministry; or worst of all, 3) to worship Satan instead of God the Father. Jesus answers all three of these temptations by quoting Deuteronomy (Deut 8:3; Deut 6:16; 6:14) as described in Matthew's account of this event (Matt 4:1-11). Note that is Mark's gospel, after the temptation "the angels attended Him" (Mark 1:13).

Then after John was "put in prison" (Mark 1:14) Jesus begins His public preaching with the theme of the Kingdom of God. The Scripture describes this as follows: "The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!" (Mar 1:15). It is surprising to me that so little has been written- especially in the "popular Christian press" about the message that Jesus proclaims here. Since this "nearness" of the Kingdom is an important feature of Jesus' message, He explains at several points what this message means, in many cases using parables. In fact, Jesus Himself tells the disciples that His message is hidden from the many, and would be revealed (at least initially) only to those closest to Him "He told them, "The secret of the kingdom of God has been given to you. But to those on the outside everything is said in parables." (Mark 4:11).

Jesus then call Simon and Andrew, the two brothers, who were fishing nearby. Jesus promises that they will be "fishers of people" if they follow Him (Mark 1:17). Note that they followed Him immediately, leaving behind their previous lives and entering into discipleship. (Mark 1:20) How hard we sometimes make that commitment! We over-commit to all the wrong things, and don't leave room for simple obedience and commitment to following the Master!

Jesus then teaches in the synagogue, “as one who had authority” (Mark 1:22). Of course He had authority- he was present when the very events of Scripture took place, and witnessed their recording by God’s servants! I am certain that the “religious leaders” of the time were at least curious and perhaps offended that this “unschooled” teacher would dare to teach in their very place of instruction. Little did they know Who the Teacher was!

Leviticus 24-25 February 17, 2014 Mark 1:23-45

Leviticus 24 begins with a description of the lamps which are to be “kept burning continually” (Lev 24:2) before the Lord. They are to be fueled with “clear oil pressed from olives” (Lev 24:2) brought as an offering by God’s people. There is also to be 12 loaves of bread from the “finest flour” (Lev 24:5) which is presented to the Lord. Some of this bread would serve as food for the priests (Lev 24:9). We are reminded here of God’s nature by several rich symbols- the bread which God provided to His people in the wilderness, the bread which is a sustainer of life, and Jesus Himself who in John’s gospel declared Himself to be “the bread of life” (John 6:32-35). The light of God’s presence is symbolized by the light from “clear oil” lamps- the light that is present always in His presence with us!

Blasphemy- the very charge brought against Jesus- was the issue with a young man :” the son an Israelite mother and an Egyptian father” (Lev 24:10). Blasphemy is, by definition, ” the act of insulting or showing contempt or lack of reverence for God’. Apparently this young man blasphemed the Name of God “with a curse” (Lev 24:11).. The young man was brought to Moses and put into custody (Lev 24:11-12). There was a waiting period while “the will of the Lord” would be clear (Lev 24:12). The sentence for this blasphemy was stoning to death (Lev 24:14). Then the pronouncement is made by God to Moses: “‘Anyone who curses their God will be held responsible; anyone who blasphemes the name of the Lord is to be put to death. The entire assembly must stone them. Whether foreigner or native-born, when they blaspheme the Name they are to be put to death.” (Lev 24:15b-16). God then further describes punishments for various acts- “Life for life, fracture for fracture, tooth for tooth, eye for eye” (Lev 24:20). This certainly seems harsh to modern readers, but was actually a moderation of ancient practice. In many cases, a life taken was compensated by many lives- all those in a village, for example. God seems to be underlining the seriousness of these acts as breaking the moral law of the universe, which God Himself has established! The blasphemer is then taken outside the camp and stoned per God’s instruction (Lev 24:23).

God then established a Sabbath Year (each seventh year) and a Year of Jubilee (after 7X7= 49 years). A Sabbath of Sabbaths! God describes this year as follows: ” Consecrate the fiftieth year and proclaim liberty throughout the land to all its inhabitants. It shall be a jubilee for you; each of you is to return to your family property and to your own clan. The fiftieth year shall be a jubilee for you; do not sow and do not reap what grows of itself or harvest the untended vines. For it is a jubilee and is to be holy for you; eat only what is taken directly from the fields.” (Lev 25-10-12). Everyone id to return “to their own property” (Lev 25:13) and slaves are to be redeemed. This is later the basis of Ruth being redeemed by a “kinsman redeemer” Boaz. As God describes the process: “If a foreigner residing among you becomes rich and any of your fellow Israelites become poor and sell themselves to the foreigner or to a member of the foreigner’s clan, they retain the right of redemption after they have sold themselves. One of their relatives may redeem them: An uncle or a cousin or any blood relative in their clan may redeem them. Or if they prosper, they may redeem themselves.” (Lev 25:47-49). God goes on to say

that He is the legitimate redeemer of all Israel, and that He will redeem (buy back) all those not redeemed by the mechanisms He established in the Year of Jubilee: “Even if someone is not redeemed in any of these ways, they and their children are to be released in the Year of Jubilee, 55 for the Israelites belong to me as servants. They are my servants, whom I brought out of Egypt. I am the LORD your God.” (Lev 25:54-55).

Mark 1:23-45

Even the demons know Jesus and His Name! They also believe in God (Jas 2:19). When Jesus cast out the “impure spirit” in the man at the synagogue in Capernaum, the spirit cried out:” “What do you want with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are—the Holy One of God!” (Mark 1:24).Jesus then commanded “Be quiet” and “Come out of him” (Mark 1:25). The man “shook violently” and the spirit then left him. The prople were astonished and impressed at this One who: “gives orders to impure spirits and they obey him.” (Mark 1:27). News of this “spread quickly” (Mark 1:28).

Jesus then leaves the synagogue. No doubt the word has spread that a gifted healer is in the midst, so “many” are brought to Jesus for healing. (Mark 1:34). Demon possessed were healed, and Jesus did something remarkable with these demons- “He also drove out many demons, but he would not let the demons speak because they knew who he was.” (Mark 1:34). Now why would Jesus not allow the demons to identify Him? Surely the knowledge that Jesus was the Messiah- the one waited for so long- would be an enhancement to His ministry. Yet Jesus kept a “low profile” in this regard. He preferred to have those He met, taught and healed to take Him as He was before them- a gifted teacher, healer, preacher and friend. He may have known that if word was spread of His true nature, that those in power would bring His ministry to a premature end. This is certainly one of the questions I will ask Him when I see Him again in heaven!

Jesus then does what he does so often- He prays! His communion with God was perfect- unparalleled in human history, and yet He: “went off to a solitary place, where he prayed.” (Mark 1:35). How can we do any less? If the very Son of God sees prayer as a priority, so should we! When the time of prayer is ended, Jesus then goes back to His “active” mission. In His own words: “Let us go somewhere else—to the nearby villages—so I can preach there also. That is why I have come.” (Mark 1:38). So He went through Galilee, “preaching in their synagogues and driving out demons” (Mark 1:39).

keep a low profile in Jesus then heals a man of leprosy. The conversation between them is a little suprprising, even startling to those who have not carefully read all of Jesus’ words: ” Jesus was indignant. He reached out his hand and touched the man. “I am willing,” he said. “Be clean!” Immediately the leprosy left him and he was cleansed.” (Mark 1:40-42). The word “indignant” is the sticking point in this translation. Some others render the word as “had compassion”. Certainly we prefer to think that Jesus had compassion on this one who was disfigured, ritually unclean, and systematically rejected or ignored by most people. Yet couldn’t Jesus show indignation – even irritation? Is the Son of God exempt from the normal range of human emotions? When Jesus sees that the man is willing to be healed, Jesus heals him but warns him “not to tell anyone” (Mark 1:44). The man is instructed to follow the Law of Moses and present himself to a priest (Mark 1:44). And the man does the very opposite! He “went out and began to talk freely, spreading the news. “ (Mark 1:45). The result of this was that Jesus could no longer ”enter a town openly but stayed outside in lonely places.” (Mark 1:45). Perhaps another reason that Jesus

tried to His ministry! Yet the people still came to Him “from everywhere” (Mark 1:45).

Leviticus 26-7 February 18, 2014 Mark 2

God makes a wonderful promise- if you keep my commands I will prosper you and give you peace and plenty: “If you follow my decrees and are careful to obey my commands”: is the way God communicated to them. The blessings and promises are specific- rain at the proper time and good yield from crops and trees (Lev 26:4); eating your fill of food and living securely (Lev 26:5); removal of dangerous animals and the “sword” (armed conflict) (Lev 26:6); victory over enemies (Lev 26:7-8); and God’s abiding promise and His keeping of this covenant (Lev 26:9). God promises to “walk around among them” (Lev 26:12) and most importantly “I walk among you and be your God, and you will be my people.” (Lev 26:12). God is establishing His people and His presence among them with a covenant- a legally binding agreement- and God always kept His covenant. Unfortunately for God’s people, the continually did NOT keep their part of te agreement!

God the delineates the terrible things that will happen if Israel is not obedient::” sudden terror, wasting diseases and fever that will destroy your sight and sap your strength.” (Lev 26: 16). There will be no reason to plant a crop because “your enemies will eat it” (Lev 26:16). Continued disobedience to God will create even worse punishment: “IIf you remain hostile toward me and refuse to listen to me, I will multiply your afflictions seven times over, as your sins deserve.” (Lev 26:21). Things will become so bad from continued disobedience that God’s people will virtually “disappear”: “You will perish among the nations; the land of your enemies will devour you. 39 Those of you who are left will waste away in the lands of their enemies because of their sins; also because of their ancestors’ sins they will waste away.” (Lev 26:38-39).

But there is hope for restoration! Leviticus 26 contains a very significant and important “if, then” statement: If “they will confess their sins and the sins of their ancestors—their unfaithfulness and their hostility toward me” then “I will remember my covenant with Jacob.” (Lev 26:40,42). The door is always open to restoration of the covenant, because God is faithful and righteous! Leviticus 27 completes the “decrees, the laws and the regulations that the Lord established at Mount Sinai between himself and the Israelites through Moses.” (Lev 27:34).

Those whose passion is gender and age equity will perhaps be offended by God's prescriptions as to the "value of a person" when taken in pledge. An adult male is valued at 50 shekels of silver, and adult female at only 30. The old and young are also valued less- a male over 60 at 15 shekels, a female at 10 (Lev 27:3-7). If "If anyone making the vow is too poor to pay the specified amount", the priest can then determine what the repayment/redemption value is (Lev 27:8). Does this mean God values me more than women, or the old and very young less than other? Certainly to the modern mind this seems grossly discriminatory and unfair. Yet this is most likely a reflection of the societal structure of that day- male oriented and adult oriented- after all, it is more than likely that adult men wrote the Scriptures! The following Scriptures in Leviticus 27 describe the practice of "dedication to the Lord: (which is essentially an offering which could be bought back; and "devotion to the Lord"- or setting aside something as "holy to the Lord" – Leviticus states : "everything so devoted is most holy to the Lord.." (Lev 27: 28). A person devoted to the Lord must be executed! This is the basis of the dilemma that Jephthah faces that is described in Judges 11:29-31. The saving point in interpreting this difficult passage id that Jephthah promised to dedicate his daughter and not devote his daughter. Additionally, Jephthah went on to judge Israel after that for 6 years. It is hard to imaging he would be effective (or even capable of holding this office) if he had participated in human sacrifice (http://hermeneutics.stackexchange.com/questions/1227/did-jephthah-actually-sacrifice-his-daughter). The last part of this chapter an book describe the tithe (Lev 27:30-33).

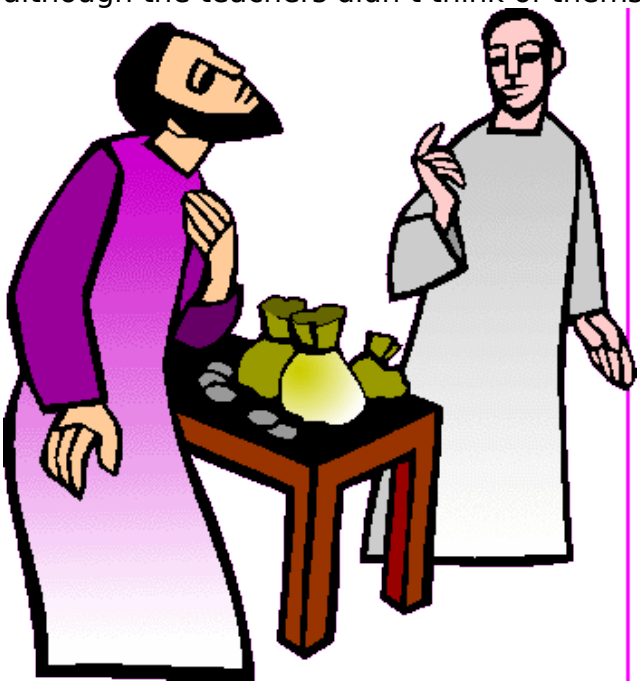
Mark 2

So many came that the doorway was blocked…and yet a crippled man's friends wanted desperately to have their friend be healed by Jesus. They were willing and resourceful- opening the (thatch?) roof and lowering the man to Jesus. The Master must have been impressed, but His main thought was on the faith of the crippled man that Jesus could heal him. Jesus' words are: "Son, your sins are forgiven." (Mark 2:5). Not "Rise and walk"…but "Your sins are forgiven". Jesus understood the connection between unforgiven sin in the spiritual realm and physical problems. It is not that the man was being punished for his sins- otherwise we would all be lame- or worse. It was that the sin in this person's life- despite his amazing faith- that was hindering him physically. So does this mean that we can have both faith and sin in our lives at the same time…apparently so!

The teachers of the law who were present were thinking to themselves that this statement from Jesus was blasphemy. How could anyone but God forgive sin? (Mark 2:7). Jesus knows their thoughts (after all He is fully God!) and immediately challenges them: "Which is easier: to say to this paralyzed man, 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'Get up, take your mat and walk'? But I want you to know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins." So he said to the man, "I tell you, get up, take your mat and go home." (Mark 2:9b-11). Notice the order in which the events occurred- first, take care of the sin problem, and then the physical healing takes place. Those present were naturally amazed, stating that they had never seen "anything like this" (Mark 2:12).

Speaking to a tax collector- a Jew who collected taxes for Rome? Why would a God fearing Jew do such a thing. Yet Jesus not only spoke with "Levi son of Alphaeus" (Mark 2:14), but also called him to follow. And Levi (Matthew) immediately "got up" and followed Jesus. Later, Jesus eats a dinner meal with Matthew and other "tax collectors and sinners" (Mark 2:15). When Jesus is criticized for this practice, He

reminds the teachers of the Law: “It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners.” (Mark 2:17). The hearers of this statement by Jesus most likely interpreted it differently- the “sinners” as a statement of their worth to Jesus, and the teachers of the Law as at least a partial affirmation that they were “healthy”. Some of the teachers undoubtedly noticed the sarcasm implied by Jesus. All of them- teacher and tax collectors- were sinners- although the teachers didn’t think of themselves that way very often.



Next Jesus and His disciples are criticized for “not fasting” like John and his disciples. .Jesus’ answer is simple and direct. He is the “bridegroom”, and His followers will be rejoicing while He (the bridegroom) is with them, but then: “the time will come when the bridegroom will be taken from them, and on that day they will fast.” (Mark 2:20). Jesus then goes on to describe the radical “newness” of His message as compared to that which came before, by using the analogy of wine and wineskins. New wine must go in new wineskins, and old wine in old wineskins. You can’t put the “new” wine into the old wineskins. So then, the “new message” that Jesus brings must be interpreted in a new way- the old way of interpreting must be put aside. The Law, instead of being a series of external demands and regulations, becomes fulfilled as a joyful response to the amazing gifts that God has bestowed freely to us as His children! It’s the heart that matters- so instead of “hearts of stone” (Ezek. 11:9), God will put His law in their hearts. This is beautifully stated in Jeremiah 31:33-34

“This is the covenant I will make with the people of Israel
after that time,” declares the Lord.
“I will put my law in their minds
and write it on their hearts.
I will be their God,
and they will be my people.

No longer will they teach their neighbor,
or say to one another, ‘Know the Lord,’

because they will all know me,
    from the least of them to the greatest,”
declares the Lord.
“For I will forgive their wickedness
    and will remember their sins no more.

Once again, criticism comes to Jesus and His disciples, this time for “breaking the Sabbath” by eating grains of wheat which were “harvested” by picking heads of grain. (Mark 2:23-24). Jesus uses this moment as a “teaching moment” and uses this opportunity to expand and correct the Pharisees’ ideas about Sabbath. He says:” “Have you never read what David did when he and his companions were hungry and in need? In the days of Abiathar the high priest, he entered the house of God and ate the consecrated bread, which is lawful only for priests to eat. And he also gave some to his companions.” Then he said to them, “The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath. So the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath.” (Mark 2:26-28). SO the Sabbath, instead of a dry and dutiful legal obligation, is then interpreted as to its original purpose- as a gift! And the Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath.

Numbers 1-2 February 19, 2014 Mark 3:1-21

Numbers is a book concerned with a series of “counts”- first a count of the men in each tribe over 20 capable of serving in the Hebrew army. Moses enlisted the help of men appointed from each clan (Num. 1:4-16). The total number counted was 603,550 (Num 1:46). This represents probably 1½ million persons total, assuming a wife and child per man. This number is staggering if you consider the amount of food and water needed to sustain this number of people- not counting the food and water for the livestock. The tribe of Levi was not counted among this total (Num. 1:47). They were kept separate from the rest of the people, due partly to their special functions and duties. As God states in Numbers 1:43 “The Levites, however, are to set up their tents around the tabernacle of the covenant law so that my wrath will not fall on the Israelite community. The Levites are to be responsible for the care of the tabernacle of the covenant law.”

God’s people were ordered to camp around the Tent of Meeting in a certain order and location (Num. 2:3-32). One of the lessons God was teaching was that there is order in the nation when the Tent of Meeting is the center of everything. The whole of the religious life of God’s people centered on the Tent of Meeting. It was there that God was present, as He had promised He would be! And God’s people obeyed: “So the Israelites did everything the Lord commanded Moses; that is the way they encamped under their standards, and that is the way they set out, each of them with their clan and family.” (Num. 2:34)

Mark 3:1-21

Another chance to trap Jesus, and to accuse Him of breaking the Sabbath! This was what Jesus’ enemies hoped for, and they had their chance again when a man “with a shriveled hand” was present at the synagogue (at Caperneum?). Jesus was direct and open with His actions here, as He was so many times. He said: ““Stand up in front of everyone.” (Mark 3:3). Then Jesus asked His accusers “Which is lawful on

the Sabbath: to do good or to do evil, to save life or to kill?" But they remained silent." (Mark 3:4). So Jesus, in the rabbinical tradition, answers an (implied) question with a question of His own. Now the teachers of the law faced a dilemma- was it truly wrong to heal- to do good- on the Sabbath? There were elaborate rules as to what was acceptable and not "work" which could be done on the Sabbath, including rescuing an animal from a ditch.(Luke 14:5) Compassion, in this case, overruled what might be the letter of the law. It certainly takes tugging to get a large animal out of a roadside ditch!

Jesus was troubled at the attitude of the teachers of the law- He saw clearly how hard their hearts were. I am certain that Jesus loved them as much as He loved the one who needed healing and who was "blameless" in this whole process. Surely it troubles and saddens our Lord when we show Him how hard our hearts are! But Jesus presses on: ""Stretch out your hand." He stretched it out, and his hand was completely restored." (Mark 3:5b). And at that moment, several things happened at once: 1) a person was freed from a crippling condition- and for the first time was whole; 2) the teachers of the law (Pharisees), instead of rejoicing at this miraculous healing, " went out and began to plot with the Herodians how they might kill Jesus." (Mark 3:6).

Jesus then went with His disciples to the lake (Sea of Galilee?) and a huge crowd gathered. There were so many that Jesus told His disciples: "to have a small boat ready for him, to keep the people from crowding him." (Mark 3:9). He healed "many", and some were so eager for healing that they: "were pushing forward to touch him." (Mark 3:10). I can imagine I would do the same- their eagerness was justified- just the touch of Jesus would change everything! Once again, the "impure spirits" clearly identified Jesus, as they fell down before Him and cried out ""You are the Son of God." (Mark 3:11). But Jesus gave them "strict orders" not to tell others (Mark 3:12). Once again, Jesus is deliberately keeping His identity as the Son of

God from being widely distributed and acclaimed. Perhaps in this case it was the natural reaction to the Pharisees' plans to plot His death.

In Mark's gospel, Jesus at this time calls the twelve to be uniquely His. All the disciples are named in Mark 3:14-19. This can, in fact be harmonized with the more "individual" calling of Jesus' disciples as recorded in Matthew's Gospel. The translation for the word "appointed" in Mark 3:14 can also mean "designating to be apostles"- which is clearly reflected later in the same chapter of Mark where the gospel writer notes that these twelve had a special appointment reserved for them "that they might be with him and that he might send them out to preach and to have authority to drive out demons." (Mark 3:14-15). So they were originally called- as presumably a significant number of persons were- but these twelve had a special "apostolic" appointment- to teach and have special authority.

Jesus then enters "a house" (Mark 3:20) and the crowd that gathers is so large that Jesus and His disciples were "not able to eat". It is certainly worth noting that Jesus, who said of Himself that He had "no place to lay His head" (Matthew 8:20; Luke 9:58) , was clearly supported by many who admired Him, supported Him, and tended to His (and His disciples') physical needs. Jesus was therefore "free" to do the tasks appointed to Him by His Father! Jesus is then accused- by His family no less- of being "crazy" (Mark 3:21). This is, of course. One of the options we have in believing- or not believing- Jesus' claims to be the Son of God. As C.S. Lewis stated in his famous "trilemma"- Jesus is either a liar, a lunatic, or Lord. Wise men then and today choose the third option.

Numbers 3-4 February 20, 2014 Mark 3:22-35

Numbers 3 and 4 is a literal "numbering" and "naming" of the tribe of Levi. If you know someone with the last name "Levy" it is likely that they are of Jewish descent and from this tribe. The sons of Aaron are named- the firstborn Nadab as well as Abihu, Eleazar and Ithamar. Nadab and Abihu were "consumed by fire" when offering an unlawful incense offering to God (Num 3:2-4) and the remaining sons Eleazar and Ithamar took their places (Lev 10:1-2).

God described to Moses what the duties and responsibilities of the Levites were to be: "They are to perform duties for him (Aaron) and for the whole community at the tent of meeting by doing the work of the tabernacle. They are to take care of all the furnishings of the tent of meeting, fulfilling the obligations of the Israelites by doing the work of the tabernacle." (Num 3:7-8). God states clearly that the firstborn of the tribe of Levis were to be "mine" (Num 3:12,13). God, of course, claims ownership of all the firstborn- but these firstborn had specially assigned duties. Each of the sons of Levi- Gershon, Kohath, and Merari represented a larger clan which was given specific duties: 1) the Gershonites were responsible "for the care of the tabernacle and tent, its coverings, the curtain at the entrance to the tent of meeting, the curtains of the courtyard, the curtain at the entrance to the courtyard surrounding the tabernacle and altar, and the ropes—and everything related to their use. (Num 3:25b-26); 2) the Kohathites were responsible for "the care of the ark, the table, the lampstand, the altars, the articles of the sanctuary used in ministering, the curtain, and everything related to their use." (Num 3:31); and 3) the Merarites were appointed "to take care of the frames of the tabernacle, its crossbars, posts,

bases, all its equipment, and everything related to their use, as well as the posts of the surrounding courtyard with their bases, tent pegs and ropes." (Num 3:36b-37).

The total number of Levites were counted, and their number was 22,000. The firstborn of the other tribes were counted, and the number was 22,273. So God required that for each of the 273 "extra" firstborn that a certain amount (5 shekels) of silver be collected for redemption money. (Num 3:39-51). Since God already "owns" the firstborn, and since each Levite counts for one firstborn, the "extras" were redeemed by giving of money- some 1365 shekels!

God then issues even more specific directions and details about the tasks He has assigned to the Kohathites (Num 4:1-20); the Gershonites (Num 4:21-28) and the Merarites (Num 4:29-33). The numbering of men from ages 30-50 in all the Levite clans was then made, and the number was 8,590 total- 2750 Kohathites; 2630 Gershonites, and 3200 Merarites. These "numbers" were important to God to satisfy the many detailed needs to properly care for and maintain the place of worship. The honor due to God is represented by this amazing attention to detail. Only the best and finest we have is worthy to offer to God.

Mark 3:22-35

Possessed by the Devil himself!- or "Bellzebul" as it is rendered here. This was the accusation flung at Jesus when He entered the "house" (Mar 3:20-22). Jesus had a convincing and logical reply: "How can Satan drive out Satan? If a kingdom is divided against itself, that kingdom cannot stand. If a house is divided against itself, that house cannot stand. And if Satan opposes himself and is divided, he cannot stand; his end has come. In fact, no one can enter a strong man's house without first tying him up. Then he can plunder the strong man's house. Truly I tell you, people can be forgiven all their sins and every slander they utter, but whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit will never be forgiven; they are guilty of an eternal sin." (Mark 3:23b-29).
Abraham Lincoln quoted Mark 3:25 in a famous speech about a "house divided"- in this case the "house" was the union of states (June 16, 1858). So Jesus shows his unparalleled command of both logic and Scripture in this response. Truly, Satan cannot fight "against himself" and succeed. Then a remarkable statement is made- there is an unforgiveable sin- blasphemy against the Holy Spirit. Some have wondered about this, because Jesus died to forgive us from "all sin" (1 John 1:9; Titus 2:14). Yet there is a sin- the continued refusal to allow God to deal with us and our sin- that is unforgiveable. This sin is "unforgiveable" not because God is not ABLE to forgive any sin, but because we have chosen to harden our hearts to the point where we don't allow God to be heard. We then don't ask for forgiveness, don't confess and therefore are not forgiven.

One of the most touching examples of this in my own walk was the (wrongful) belief of Leroy Schroen (my first wife's father) that he had committed the unpardonable sin by being "angry with God" He was recovering from open heart surgery, and was very depressed- as many find themselves after such a major invasive procedure. He told me that "he couldn't read his Bible" because "it condemns me". No more Godly man I have ever known- and yet he was fearful that God couldn't handle his depression and anger.

Jesus was then surrounded by a crowd (not an unusual occurrence) and his mother and brothers approached, wishing to speak with Him. Jesus then takes the opportunity in this "teachable moment" to explain how God sees "family". "Who are my mother and brothers?" Jesus asks, ""Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does God's will is my brother and sister and mother." (Mark 3:34b-35). Jesus was NOT saying (or implying) that He rejected his natural nuclear family, He was expanding our awareness as to what the family of God consists of- those who seek God and wish to learn and follow His ways! We are family- a royal family- we are "children of the King"! (Gal. 3:26)

Numbers 5-6 February 21, 2014 Mark 4:1-20

The camp must be kept clean- disease free and ritually clean. (Num. 5:1-4). Such things seem outlandish to us and at least strange in this era of modern medicine and under the New Covenant that Jesus established. Yet these regulations had merit- and to a large degree still have merit, not only for the continued good health of God's people but for their spiritual education. God cannot tolerate, fellowship with, or "look on" sin (Hab. 1:13). Thus we must make every effort to live lives of purity and obedience to Him!

Next Numbers deals with restitution- one of the solid pillars of truth that our modern judicial system is built on. When someone wrongs another, it is their responsibility under God (and under the law) to make restitution. In the prescription seen here in Numbers, a "penalty" of 20% or one fifth- is added to the restitution (Num. 5:7).

The modern reader will no doubt have some difficulty with the "test" for an impure wife. Ignoring for a moment the issues of political "correctness" and equality of the genders, this male dominated society desired for women to be "pure" and faithful to their husbands. There is no similar test for a man's "purity"! The man who suspects his wife of infidelity is to take her to the priest and bring a specified offering (Num. 5:11-15). The woman is then to drink of water that has had some "dust from the tabernacle floor" added to it. If she is guilty, her abdomen will swell

and she will either miscarry or be infertile from that point. If she is "pure" or "innocent" the water will do her no harm. (Num. 5:16-28). Some have suggested that this is primarily a psychological test- the guilt of the woman's sin will cause her to have physical manifestations, a clear conscience will cause no physical changes.

Numbers 6 then discusses the vows and requirements of one who would be a Nazarite. This vow was for a specified period, and required: 1) abstinence from wine or all grapes; 2) allowing the hair on the head to grow long- no shaving or cutting was allowed; and 3) avoidance of any dead body- human or animal (Num. 6:1-12). A man or woman could take these vows for a period of special dedication to the Lord. Once the period was over, the Nazarite would present themselves to the priest, bring an offering and shave off the hair that grew during their period of dedication (Num. 6:13-21). Samson is perhaps the most famous example in the Bible of a Nazarite- his period of observance was "permanent"- his whole life was to be spent observing these vows (Judges 13:5) and Samuel the prophet (1 Sam 1:11).

Numbers 6 concludes with a blessing that is commonly used in Christian gatherings today as a benediction: (Num. 6:24-26).

"'"The LORD bless you
and keep you;
the LORD make his face shine on you
and be gracious to you;
the LORD turn his face toward you
and give you peace."'

Mark 4:1-20

Mark's gospel then records the Parable of the Sower (Mark 4:1-20). This parable was one of the few that was specifically interpreted by Jesus. It is assumed that this explanation to Jesus' inner circle was to insure their understanding of the key parts of evangelism and discipleship that Jesus so beautifully tells. The survival of seeds is dependent on the soil and other surroundings, a reality that most of Jesus' listeners would have clearly understood. A modern group of "city folks" maybe not so much! But Jesus, always the perfect Teacher, communicated these important truths in a memorable and clear manner. May scholars have suggested that the reason Jesus told so many stories/parables is so they could easily be remembered and passed on in the oral traditions of Judaism (see http://www.gotquestions.org/Jesus-parables.html).

Two themes are present in this parable- first the success of evangelism is dependent on the spiritual condition of the hearer. Faith comes by hearing (Romans 10:17), but the hearer's life situation and hunger for God determine whether or not the hearer will allow God's truth to change them! The seed that fell on the path truly had no chance- the birds ate it (Mark 4:4). The seed that fell in rocky soil lived only a while- it did not have enough earth to nourish it (Mark 4:5-6) The plants from this soil withered from the sun, because they had "no root" (Mark 4:6). The seeds that fell among the thorns grew, but were choked out by the hardier thorns (Mark 4:7). But the seeds that fell on good soil not only produced plants, but produced and abundance of plants! "God's multiplier" was 30, 60, or even 100 times. This brings us to the second truth- making disciples. It's one thing to bring a person to the point of understanding and receiving what God's prevenient grace has already prepared the person to receive. They are converted, and that is a wondrous and joyous thing. Jesus, however, commanded us to make DISCIPLES (Matthew 28:19). These disciples, who are thoroughly grounded in the faith, nurtured, encouraged,

prayed for and prayer over, will then make other disciples. These disciples will in turn make other disciples- so the family of God can (theoretically at least) grow exponentially!

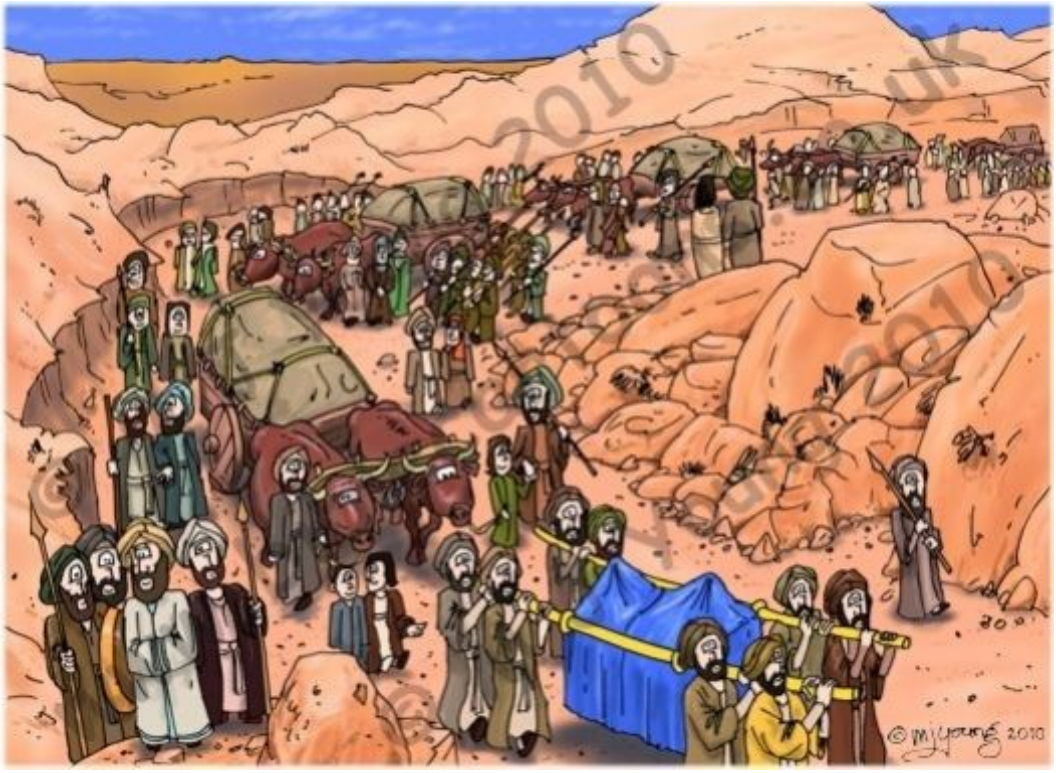
Jesus explains this parable to His disciples (Mark 4:13-20). Many have wondered why Jesus did not explain His parables to "everyone". Part of the answer is found in the quotation from Isaiah (Isaiah 6:9-10), in which the prophet says that there will be "hearing but never understanding". Others have suggested that most of us don't really like or embrace the truth unless it either doesn't really challenge us or is an affirmation of our own "goodness". Jesus was wise in knowing that the truth sometimes has to be slowly absorbed, and then the embrace of the truth is still- for us people at least- incomplete and imperfect. How many times did Jesus clearly tell His disciples that He would die by the hands of His enemies, and yet they (the disciples) seemed not to hear or understand!

Numbers 7 February 22, 2014 Mark 4:21-41

Dedication- what a wonderful word! It can mean "focus or determination" or it can mean "a ceremony that establishes order or ownership". Webster's definitions are "a feeling of very strong support for or loyalty to someone or something"; and " the act of officially saying that something (such as a new building) was created for a particular purpose (such as worship) or to remember or honor a particular person." In this case, God's people were showing their God that the Tabernacle- the "portable Temple" was to be totally and completely dedicated to God's use. It was their hope that He would inhabit this sacred space and be WITH them always!

The articles brought to the Tabernacle reflect God's glory both in their value and number. God's people brought their very best and costliest to show God their commitment to Him and their love and adoration of Him- by their acts they declared Him as worthy of their best, worthy of their finest- worthy of worship!

Numbers 7:6-83 is a list of the activities of each day of dedication, a list that encompassed 12 days and twelve sets of activities. In the end, the Scripture tells us:" When Moses entered the tent of meeting to speak with the Lord, he heard the voice speaking to him from between the two cherubim above the atonement cover on the ark of the covenant law. In this way the Lord spoke to him." (Num. 7:89) So God showed Moses two very important things: 1) He was present with them; and 2) He would speak to them (through Moses) in a clear and unmistakable voice!



Mark 4:21-41

Three parables and a storm that is calmed. Jesus shows His command of the art and gift of teaching, and His mastery over the physical universe. These are not unrelated- the point of unity is Jesus Himself- He was (and is!) teacher, preacher, healer, Master, and Lord of all!

Jesus taught those with Him about light. In the days before electric illumination, street lights, and other almost ever-present light sources the dark was real and pervasive. Jesus took the opportunity of those seeing light as a positive and illuminating force to make a more spiritual point. We who call His Name are to be light- casting out fear and darkness, showing the way! And our source is God Himself- thorough the presence and power of the Holy Spirit. Jesus then goes on to say some hard for us to hear, much less apply: “With the measure you use, it will be measured to you—and even more. Whoever has will be given more; whoever does not have, even what they have will be taken from them.” (Mark 24b-25) When we forgive, we are forgiven; when we show love, we are loved, when we have mercy, we are shown mercy! We must remember, though, that it is not out of our own power or “goodness” that these good things come- it is from God’s own Holy Spirit. If we don’t show mercy, love, and forgiveness- the “good things” of God will not grow in us and they will be “taken away”.

Jesus then spoke in a parable about growing seeds. This parable is about faith and growth. Jesus said: “A man scatters seed on the ground. Night and day, whether he sleeps or gets up, the seed sprouts and grows, though he does not know how. All by itself the soil produces grain—first the stalk, then the head, then the full kernel in the head. As soon as the grain is ripe, he puts the sickle to it, because the harvest has come.” (Mark 4:26b-29) Notice that the growth occurs even though we don’t understand how!

Next Jesus tells the parable of the mustard seed. As I have mentioned earlier in this Journal, this is one of my most precious memories of my mother. She wore a necklace with a glass "globe" containing a single mustard seed- a reminder of this parable. So many times I have wondered if my "tiny" bit of faith can indeed grow as this seed does, so that: "when planted, it grows and becomes the largest of all garden plants, with such big branches that the birds can perch in its shade." (Mark 4:32). Once again, Jesus has both a public and private version of His teaching in parables- in public, the parable itself only, but when in private with His disciples, He "explained everything." (Mark 4:34).

Then the disciples and their Master went on a journey in a boat, and a storm suddenly blew up. We must remember the extreme fear that most ordinary people had of the ocean or large lakes- and the fear of drowning. Jesus, instead of worrying or showing any fear, "was in the stern, sleeping on a cushion." (Mark 4:38). When the disciples waked Jesus, they asked Him if He was even concerned about them and their safety:" "Teacher, don't you care if we drown?" (Mark 4:38b). Jesus then told the storm and waves: "Quiet- be still" (Mark 4:39) and they DID. The disciples then express their awe and astonishment at Jesus' power. He could literally calm the storm- they exclaimed that "Even the wind and the waves obey him!" (Mark 4:41). What they did not understand was that their lack of faith had caused their fear. As a popular bumper sticker states "No Jesus- Know Fear; Know Jesus- No Fear!". I'm not a great fan of "bumper sticker theology", but I think this one nails it.

Numbers 8-10 February 23, 2014 Mark 5:1-20

Setting up and setting apart- all to God's exacting specifications! God's instructions were clear and detailed. It mattered to God that the lamps were arranged exactly as He desired: "so that they faced forward on the lampstand." (Num. 8:3). Setting apart of the Levites was a similar exacting process- filled with specifications and requirements that God expected to be followed exactly! The Levites were to serve from ages 25-50 (Num. 8:24-25), and were to undergo regular and systematic ritual cleansing so that their offerings and activities would be acceptable and pleasing to God.

The Passover festival is described in Numbers 9. The Passover was to be celebrated: "at twilight on the fourteenth day of this month, in accordance with all its rules and regulations." (Num. 9:3). Those participating in this meal: "are to eat the lamb, together with unleavened bread and bitter herbs. They must not leave any of it till morning or break any of its bones." (Num. 9:11-12). Traditionally in the modern celebration there is an empty chair left for Elijah, and ultimately for the promised Messiah. So many of the symbols of the Passover point directly to Jesus and His sacrifice….the Lamb which is slain, the unleavened bread, and the prohibition against breaking bones. A very beautiful presentation of this is done by several messianic ("completed") Jew who present "Christ in the Passover" to interested groups. It is a very moving and worshipful experience! (http://www.jewsforjesus.org/for-congregations/programs/cip). Also please see: (http://www.godandscience.org/apologetics/passover.html). Foreigners could celebrate the Passover, if they followed the same rules and regulations as God's people were required to follow. (Num. 9:14).

We see a powerful evidence of God's presence and guidance in Numbers 9. Once the Tabernacle was set up and dedicated, a "cloud covered it" (Num. 9:15). At night the cloud "looked like fire" (Num. 9:16). No matter the time of day or night, God was PRESENT with His people, and directed their steps. When the cloud lifted, the people (and the Tabernacle) moved (Nun. 9:17). It is truly wonderful when God's

people follow Him exactly and obediently- He will lead us into new experiences that enhance our spiritual life and relationship with Him.

Communications is always a complicated- and sometime thorny- issue. This can be especially true with God's people. How are we to communicate love, correction without judgment, and how can we communicate the great Truth of the gospel in a winsome and attractive way? God's needs for communications with His people are constant- frequently He uses innovative ways to communicate as in Numbers 10. There was certainly no communication technology infrastructure available at that time, so God simply used the blasts of a trumpet (especially made out of silver for this purpose) to communicate needs to meet with leaders, the people or both (Num. 10:1-10). God instructed His people to leave Sinai, to follow the "cloud" until it rested over their next destination, the Desert of Paran (Num. 10:12). The order of the tribes undertaking this move was specified in Numbers 10:14-25. The tribe of Judah led the way, with the tribe of Dan completing the "caravan".

Mark 5:1-20

Mark 5 begins with the remarkable story of Jesus' journey to a Gentile area "across the lake" (Mark 5:1) that is called either "Gerasenes" or "Gaderenes" (also rendered "Gergesenes"). The strong evidence that this area was Gentile (non-Jewish) is the presence of herds of pigs, which were unclean! (Mark 5:11). It is not clear if Jesus had set out on an evangelistic mission (not likely since He states several times His mission to be to the "tribes of Israel" (Matthew 15:24)) or whether He was going specifically to minister to this person who "lived in the tombs" (Mark 5:3).

Jesus is approached by this (probably terrifying) man who shouted: "What do you want with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? In God's name don't torture me!" For Jesus had said to him, "Come out of this man, you impure spirit!" (Mark 5:7-8). Once again we see the clear identification of Jesus by the demons within this person. Earlier, as noted, Jesus was careful not to let His true identity become public knowledge. Here the concern seems simply to free this man from his possession. Jesus speaks to the demonic forces inside this man, asking for his/their name. In biblical times, the knowledge of someone's name gave a certain measure of power over that person. The spirits reply ""My name is Legion," he replied, "for we are many." (Mark 5:9b). Jesus then decided to cast the demons out of this man and "send them" to the herd of pigs, which was their request (Mark 5:12). The spirits then enter the pigs, who promptly ran into the lake and drowned (Mark 5:13)! The herd was numbered two thousand or more.

When word of this reached the surrounding community, they pled for Jesus to leave (Mark 5:17). This is certainly understandable. The positive result of this "exorcism" was the freeing of this man from his many demons- the negative was an enormous loss of livestock- and the monetary value they represented. There was probably not a huge market for a huge lots of recently drowned pigs!

As Jesus is leaving, the man he healed of demon possession begs Jesus to go with Him. Jesus instead on an evangelistic mission, to "tell his story": "Go home to your own people and tell them how much the Lord has done for you, and how he has had mercy on you."(Mark 5:19). And this evangelism was blessed with some early success, as the Scripture reports: "all the people were amazed." (Mark 5:20). Jesus' own disciples felt the same temptation that this man (and that we) feel- we want to "stay with Jesus" and enjoy His fellowship and marvel at His healing- but His desire is that we "tell the story" to a world that is desperate to hear, a world that lives in darkness with no real hope.

Numbers 11-13 February 24, 2014 Mark 5:21-43

Complaining about our problems- our "lot in life" is always a popular pastime. Instead of being contented and grateful for the blessings we have, we always seem to want more, better, or just something different than what we presently have. I believe that this attitude of "entitlement" is displeasing to God. We need to realize that He knows best for us, and moves in such ways that the "best" will be ours if we "wait upon the Lord" (Psalm 27:14; Isaiah 40:31). God's people complained bitterly and God sent fire- which was only extinguished when the complaining stopped (Numbers 11:1-3). Moses' prayer to the Lord was the deciding factor!

God had graciously provided manna, "bread from heaven", but the "rabble" complained: ""If only we had meat to eat! We remember the fish we ate in Egypt at no cost—also the cucumbers, melons, leeks, onions and garlic. But now we have lost our appetite; we never see anything but this manna!" (Numbers 11:4b-6). The grass is "always greener"…or so they say. What the "rabble" conveniently forgot is that they were slaves in Egypt. The people complained bitterly to Moses that they had "no meat", and Moses was so distraught at their complaining that he asked the Lord to relieve him…almost a version of "kill me now!" :" If this is how you are going to treat me, please go ahead and kill me—if I have found favor in your eyes—and do not let me face my own ruin." (Numbers 11:15). Part of the Lord's response to Moses' pleas was to organize the decision making process so that "70 elders" were appointed to assist Moses in his judging and decision making. God would take "some of power of the Spirit" from Moses and give it to these 70 men (Numbers 11:17).

The God does something that I think demonstrates what we would call "a sense of humor". He essentially says: "Meat, you want meat? I'll drown you in meat!". His actual words through Moses are:" Tell the people: 'Consecrate yourselves in preparation for tomorrow, when you will eat meat. The Lord heard you when you wailed, "If only we had meat to eat! We were better off in Egypt!" Now the Lord will give you meat, and you will eat it. You will not eat it for just one day, or two days, or five, ten or twenty days, but for a whole month—until it comes out of your nostrils and you loathe it—" (Numbers 11:18b-20). Unfortunately for the "rabble" and the grumblers, God indeed sent an abundance of meat to the camp, in the form

of quail. He then punished those who had grumbled with a terrible plague, which destroyed many of them:" Now a wind went out from the Lord and drove quail in from the sea. It scattered them up to two cubits deep all around the camp, as far as a day's walk in any direction. All that day and night and all the next day the people went out and gathered quail. No one gathered less than ten homers. Then they spread them out all around the camp. But while the meat was still between their teeth and before it could be consumed, the anger of the Lord burned against the people, and he struck them with a severe plague." (Number 11:31-33).
Moses was definitely not part of an "ideal, happy family". Both his brother Aaron and sister Miriam decided to rebel against him! Once this rebellion was started, God Himself became directly involved in stopping it. He appeared as a "pillar of cloud" (Number 12:5) and spoke to Miriam and Aaron- telling them that mostly He spoke to His prophets "in visions" or "in dreams" but that he spoke to Moses directly (Num. 12:6-8). God then punished Miriam by causing her hand to be "leprous" (Num. 12:10). Aaron asked God to spare her, and Moses cried out to God asking for his sister's healing (Num. 12:10b-13). God then relented and healed her, but required she stay away from the camp for the prescribed seven days.(Num. 12:14-15).
God promised Abraham, Isaac and Jacob/Israel a land of plenty- the land of promise. And now God ordered Moses to send an exploration party to scout out the land and report their findings back to Moses. God selected (through Moses) a representative from each of the twelve tribes- notably Hoshea (Joshua) from the tribe of Ephriam and Caleb from the tribe of Judah (Num. 13:1-16). Specific directions were given:" Go up through the Negev and on into the hill country. See what the land is like and whether the people who live there are strong or weak, few or many. What kind of land do they live in? Is it good or bad? What kind of towns do they live in? Are they unwalled or fortified? How is the soil? Is it fertile or poor? Are there trees in it or not? Do your best to bring back some of the fruit of the land." (Num. 13:17b-20).

The "spying" took forty days (Num. 15:25). A huge cluster of grapes was brought back, so large it took two men to carry it (Num. 15:23-24). The report was given on their return. To paraphrase- "We can't take this land- the people are too big and numerous, and the cities are walled" (Num. 15:27-29). But Caleb said simply: "We should go up and take possession of the land, for we can certainly do it." (Num. 15:30b). Caleb was not just boasting…he believed that God was with them, and that they could take the land with God's help! Those with less faith saw only the obstacles "All the people we saw there were of great size." (Num. 13:32). But Caleb and Joshua's response was "The Lord is with us" (Num. 14:9).

Mark 5:21-43

A synagogue leader was very concerned- his daughter was dying, and the only One he could think of to save her was Jesus. Undoubtedly, this "leader" had not only heard of Jesus' miraculous healings, he may have witnessed one or more himself. Regardless, he knew where to turn for help! He fell at Jesus' feet and pled "earnestly with him" and said:" "My little daughter is dying. Please come and put your hands on her so that she will be healed and live." (Mark 5:23b). And the Scriptures report that "Jesus went with him" (Mark 5:24).

As was the case so many times when Jesus appeared publically, a "large crowd" gathered around Him (Mark 5:24). In the crowd was a woman who was both ill and desperate. She had sought out a series of physicians and had "spent all she had" (Mark 5:26) but instead of getting better, got worse. Seeing Jesus, she thought- and believed- that: "If I just touch his clothes, I will be healed."(Mark 5:28). Then a miracle occurred- "Immediately her bleeding stopped and she felt in her body that she was freed from her suffering." (Mark 5:29). In some cases, this instant healing still occurs today. There are numerous testimonies today of instant, miraculous, total healing. Seems that God is still the Healer!

Jesus felt that "power had gone out from Him." (Mark 5:30) and began looking for the one who had touched Him. The disciples could not believe Him… "You see the people crowding against you," his disciples answered, "and yet you can ask, 'Who touched me?' " (Mark 5:31). The the woman who had been healed, trembling with fear, fell at Jesus' feet and told Him "the whole truth" (Mark 5:33). Jesus' answer is remarkable- not "I healed you" or "God healed you" but: "Daughter, your faith has healed you. Go in peace and be freed from your suffering."(Mark 5:34). Her faith was the "key" that unlocked the doorway to her healing and well being- she was free from suffering- both physical, emotional and spiritual- this is the true power of God's healing, and this is a true example of "faith healing"!

Jesus' journey, however, was to the daughter of the synagogue leader. When Jesus arrived, the "funeral and grieving" process had already started. In that culture, it

was common for the grieving family to cry out loudly- some even hired others to join them to make the departed seem "more important" (Mark 5:38) See also (http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/judaica/ejud_0002_0004_0_03747.html) for information on "professional" mourners. Jesus' words were striking and unexpected- "Why all this commotion and wailing? The child is not dead but asleep." (Mark 5:39). Instead of taking hope and looking for a miracle, the people there "laughed at Him" (Mark 5:40). How tragic and shortsighted…laughing at the prospect of a child being brought back to the grieving family!

So Jesus "put them out" (Mark 5:40) and took the parents and the disciples with him to see the girl. Jesus then said: "Talitha koum!" (which means "Little girl, I say to you, get up!"). (Mark 5:41). The girl stood up and walked around, and they were "astonished". Jesus then says two things that are important in entirely different ways: 1) He gave strict orders "not to let anyone know about this", and 2) He told them to "get her something to eat" (Mark 5:43). Jesus obviously does not want to be known "far and wide" as a miracle man- this was one of the Satanic temptations after Jesus' 40 day fast in the wilderness. Jesus also had great compassion- caring for this little one who has awakened to "new life". So compassionate was Jesus that He made sure his mother would be cared for by John, even as He was being crucified!

Numbers 14-15 February 25, 2014 Mark 6:1-32

A brick wall…and insurmountable obstacle! This is how God's people saw the claiming of the Promised Land from the present inhabitants. They people had received two differing reports- 10 of the "spies" reported tall, strong people with fortified cities- but two, Joshua and Caleb- were confident that God would deliver the land to them. Their report was: "The land we passed through and explored is exceedingly good. If the Lord is pleased with us, he will lead us into that land, a land flowing with milk and honey, and will give it to us. Only do not rebel against the Lord. And do not be afraid of the people of the land, because we will devour them. Their protection is gone, but the Lord is with us. Do not be afraid of them."

(Num. 14:7b-9). But the people lost heart and even considered stoning these two brave messengers (Num. 14:10).

God and Moses then enter into a heated discussion- some would say an argument. God's words: "How long will these people treat me with contempt? How long will they refuse to believe in me, in spite of all the signs I have performed among them? I will strike them down with a plague and destroy them, but I will make you into a nation greater and stronger than they." (Num. 14:11b-12). And Moses, though frustrated with the unbelief of his people, countered by saying to God: "Then the Egyptians will hear about it! By your power you brought these people up from among them. And they will tell the inhabitants of this land about it. They have already heard that you, Lord, are with these people and that you, Lord, have been seen face to face, that your cloud stays over them, and that you go before them in a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night. If you put all these people to death, leaving none alive, the nations who have heard this report about you will say, 'The Lord was not able to bring these people into the land he promised them on oath, so he slaughtered them in the wilderness.' "Now may the Lord's strength be displayed, just as you have declared: 'The Lord is slow to anger, abounding in love and forgiving sin and rebellion. Yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished; he punishes the children for the sin of the parents to the third and fourth generation.' In accordance with your great love, forgive the sin of these people, just as you have pardoned them from the time they left Egypt until now." (Num. 14:13b-19)

God relents from destroying His people and forgives them, but promises that none of these unfaithful: "who saw my glory and the signs I performed in Egypt and in the wilderness but who disobeyed me and tested me ten times—not one of them will ever see the land I promised on oath to their ancestors. No one who has treated me with contempt will ever see it." (Num. 14:22b-23) Only Joshua and Caleb are to enter the Promised Land. And for the unfaithful- they are to spend 40 years (roughly two generations) in the wilderness- one year for each of the forty days that the twelve spies spent in the land (Num. 14:24-35). Furthermore, God struck down the ten "unfaithful" spies with a plague, sparing only Joshua and Caleb (Num. 14:36-38).

Then a fascinating thing happens. When Moses reports what God has decided- that they may not enter the Land, they "mourned bitterly" (Num. 14:39). They then declared: "Now we are ready to go up to the land the Lord promised. Surely we have sinned!" (Num. 14:40b). But God would not be with them at this point in time, and they would not succeed in their conquest. Moses makes this clear when he tells them: "This will not succeed! Do not go up, because the Lord is not with you. You will be defeated by your enemies, for the Amalekites and the Canaanites will face you there. Because you have turned away from the Lord, he will not be with you and you will fall by the sword." (Num. 14:41b-43). Still, like disobedient children, some of them went up "toward the highest point of the hill country" (Num. 14:44), and the Amalekites and Canaanites who lived there attacked them and "beat them down" (Num. 14:45)

The in Numbers 15 God gives details about a "supplementary offering"- a food offering. (Num. 15:1-21). As is true with the other prescribed offerings, great detail is given as to the type, frequency and kinds of food that are to be offered. This offering is to commence "after you enter the land" (Num. 15:2). Then follows the rules and regulations for offerings for "unintentional sin" (Num. 15:22-29). The situation for an intentional sin is quite different, for "one who sins defiantly" (Num. 15:30). They must be "cut off" from the people (Num. 15:30-31).

A test for God's rules for the Sabbath is encountered "while the Israelites were in the wilderness" (Num. 15:32). This person was put into custody, and God's direction for punishment was given: "The man must die. The whole assembly must stone him outside the camp." (Num. 15:35). The Scripture records that this was done "outside the camp, as the Lord had commanded Moses" (Num. 15:36).

The God makes a requirement for the clothing of His people. They are to make "tassels on the corners of your garments, with a blue cord on each tassel. You will have these tassels to look at and so you will remember all the commands of the Lord, that you may obey them…" (Num. 15:38b-39). Some have suggested that these "tassels" were that part of the garment Jesus wore when He was touched by the woman needing healing (Matthew 9:20-22; Mark 5:25-34).

Mark 6:1-32

Jesus teaches in the "local synagogue" and the reaction of those who knew Him best was remarkable mostly in the unbelief so clearly shown: "Where did this man get these things?" they asked. "What's this wisdom that has been given him? What are these remarkable miracles he is performing? 3 Isn't this the carpenter? Isn't this Mary's son and the brother of James, Joseph, Judas and Simon? Aren't his sisters here with us?" And they took offense at him. (Mark 6:2-3). Jesus was able to heal a few people, but did not "do any miracles there" (Mark 6:5). Jesus was amazed at their "lack of faith" (Mark 6:6). The Scripture states that these "home town" people were "amazed" (Mark 6:2), but they were apparently amazed but not led to any faith in Jesus! It seems clear to me that Jesus' power to do miracles was not diminished, but that the ability of the unfaithful to receive these miracles was the impediment. God (and Jesus) are "gentlemen"- they don't "force" anyone to have faith or even receive a miracle.

Then Jesus sends out the twelve "two by two" and gave them "authority over impure spirits" (Mark 6:7). Their instructions are clear, they are to "take nothing for the journey except a staff" and not take with them "bread, bag or money in your belts" (Mark 6:8). They are to rely completely on the father God for everything- they didn't even tap a map or GPS! They were to enter and stay in the houses where they were welcome, and leave and "shake the dust off" where they were not welcome (Mark 6:10-11). While there they preached, anointed with oil, healed the sick and cast out demons. (Mark 6:12-13). Jesus had transferred His power to His closest and most trusted friends, and instead of this detracting from Jesus' power, His power was multiplied through the faithful efforts of His followers. Later Jesus is to refer to this same thing (John 14:12).when he says we (His followers) will do "greater things" than he had done!

The tragic story of the beheading of John the Baptists follows. John had the courage to speak out against Herod, who had married his brother's wife, Herodias. John had told Herod: "It is not lawful for you to have your brother's wife." (Mark 6:18). Herodias "held a grudge" against John and "wanted to kill him" (Mark 6:19), but Herod "protected him" partly because Herod "knew he was a holy man" and "liked to listen to him" even though Herod was "puzzled" by things John said (Mark 6:20). The came an opportunity for Herodias to exact revenge on John for his condemnation of her marriage- Herodias' daughter danced for Herod's guests at a party, and Herd was so pleased that he offered the girl "Whatever you ask I will give you, up to half my kingdom." (Mark 6:23). Herodias told her daughter to ask for the "head of John the Baptist on a platter" (Mark 6:25). Now Herod was caught- he really didn't want John executed, yet he had made a promise in front of his dinner guests and would lose face if he didn't keep his promise. Reluctantly (the Scripture

only states that Herd was “greatly distressed”- this is my guess as to his emotional state) Herod orders the execution. Then. “ hearing of this, John’s disciples came and took his body and laid it in a tomb.” (Mark 6:29). Matthew’s gospel records that at this time. Jesus heard this tragic news and “he withdrew by boat privately to a solitary place.” (Matthew 14:13). Mark does not mention this, but proceeds to the next event in Jesus’ recorded ministry- the feeding of five thousand (men).

Mark’s account states that Jesus and His disciples withdrew “to a quiet place” (Mark 6:31) to rest, but that the crowd grew quickly and Jesus saw the need to teach them and feed their souls- also later he would meet their physical needs as well.

Numbers 16-17 February 26, 2014 Mark 6:33-56

Rebellion against authority- not a new thing by any means. Always an ugly and messy situation- in today’s headlines the revolt in the Ukraine- centered in Kiev, the capitol city has been an unfortunate reminder of the price of rebellion. Some “250 Israelite men” (Num. 16:2) under the leadership of Korah, Datham and Abiram (Nem.16:1) rose up to oppose Moses, saying “You have gone too far! The whole community is holy, every one of them, and the Lord is with them. Why then do you set yourselves above the Lord’s assembly?” (Num. 16:3). Apparently the issue was not about the “holiness” of the nation of Israel but the dissatisfaction of these leaders with the leadership of Moses and Aaron. Moses told the rebellious leaders “In the morning the Lord will show who belongs to him and who is holy, and he will have that person come near him. The man he chooses he will cause to come near him. You, Korah, and all your followers are to do this: Take censers and tomorrow put burning coals and incense in them before the Lord. The man the Lord chooses will be the one who is holy. You Levites have gone too far!” (Num. 16:5b-7) Only

God could determine the “holiness” of any of His people, and Moses wisely put the decision directly in God’s hands.

Moses then summoned Dathan and Abiram, but said “No, we will not come” (Num. 16:12,14). They then bitterly complained to Moses – wasn’t it enough that he “brought us up out of a land flowing with milk and honey to kill us in the wilderness?” (Num. 16:13). Korah and his followers were then to appear before the Lord with censers lit. God then told Moses to “separate himself from this assembly” so he could put an end to it. (Num. 16:21). Moses and Aaron fell facedown and begged God not to take “the entire assembly” (Num. 16:22). God then told them “‘Move away from the tents of Korah, Dathan and Abiram.’” (Num. 16:24). Then Moses issued a challenge- if these rebels lived a normal and long life, the God did not send him- but if God “opens the earth” and swallows them up, then they would know that these men had acted contemptuously toward God (Num. 16:28-30). The answer was swift in coming! The earth opened up and “swallowed them and their households, and all those associated with Korah, together with their possessions. They went down alive into the realm of the dead, with everything they owned; the earth closed over them, and they perished and were gone from the community. At their cries, all the Israelites around them fled, shouting, “The earth is going to swallow us too!” And fire came out from the Lord and consumed the 250 men who were offering the incense. (Num. 16:32b-35). I am certain that some scientists will “explain” how a sinkhole or some “natural” phenomenon could account for this, but the point remains that the timing of this occurrence was exactly when God wanted it to be!

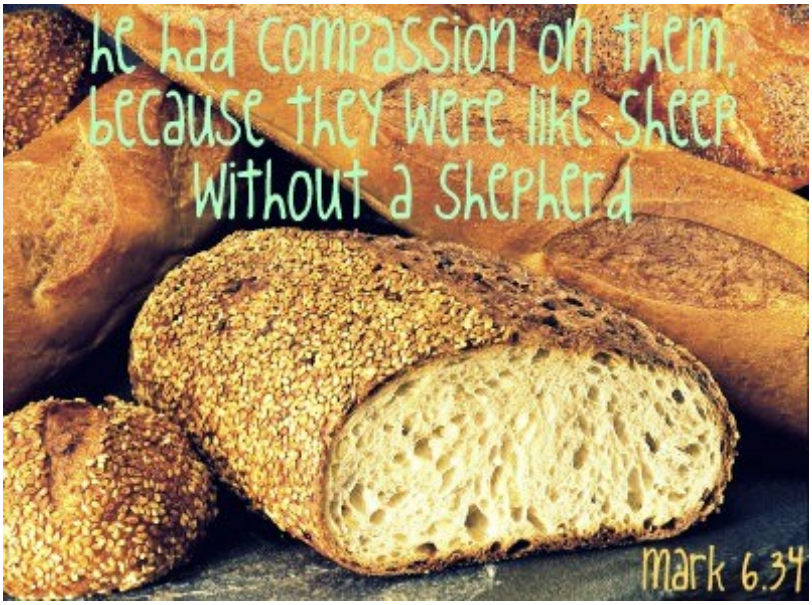
The people still were not convinced, and once again grumbled to Moses. “You have killed the Lord’s people,” they said. (Num. 16:41). God again appears and pledges to “put an end to them at once.” (Num. 16:44). Moses and Aaron offered incense to God to attempt to “make atonement” for the people, but God had already started a plague among the people. Aaron bravely stood between God and the people, as it is described in Scripture “He stood between the living and the dead, and the plague stopped. But 14,700 people died from the plague, in addition to those who had died because of Korah. Then Aaron returned to Moses at the entrance to the tent of meeting, for the plague had stopped.” (Num. 16:48-50).

Numbers 17 is concerned with God’s re-establishment of leadership among His people. Moses was told: ” “Speak to the Israelites and get twelve staffs from them, one from the leader of each of their ancestral tribes. Write the name of each man on his staff. On the staff of Levi write Aaron’s name, for there must be one staff for the head of each ancestral tribe. Place them in the tent of meeting in front of the ark of the covenant law, where I meet with you. The staff belonging to the man I choose will sprout, and I will rid myself of this constant grumbling against you by the Israelites.” (Num. 17:2b-5). And Aaron’s staff sprouted! It “budded, blossomed and produced almonds” (Num. 17:8). It was as if God said- “Make sure you don’t miss this- I’m going to do more than I promised to make sure you understand!”. Once more God gave directions to Moses: ” Put back Aaron’s staff in front of the ark of the covenant law, to be kept as a sign to the rebellious. This will put an end to their grumbling against me, so that they will not die.” Moses did just as the Lord commanded him.” (Num. 17:10b-11). The people by this time truly “feared” the Lord! I would imagine that seeing a sinkhole (or whatever it was) swallow up several families, their tents and belongings, surviving a plague and seeing 250 persons consumed by fire would have a definite effect! Their worry and despair is reflected in their outcry ““We will die! We are lost, we are all lost! Anyone who even

comes near the tabernacle of the Lord will die. Are we all going to die?" (Num. 17:12b-13)

Mark 6:33-56

The crowd had followed Jesus- he "had compassion on them" and began to teach them (Mark 6:34). The Scripture reports that he taught them "many things". I have often wondered what these were. Did Jesus have a "common list" of teachings that He presented almost everywhere He went? Did He address issues that he knew were important or especially relevant to those He was teaching? The it became late in the day, and the disciples began to worry about food for such a great gathering. They said to Jesus:" "This is a remote place," they said, "and it's already very late. Send the people away so that they can go to the surrounding countryside and villages and buy themselves something to eat." (Mark 6:35b-36). Jesus' answer was simple, direct, and challenging: "You give them something to eat.". Jesus knew that the meager treasury of the disciples was not nearly sufficient to feed such a crowd, but Jesus forced them to see clearly how inadequate they were in the face of such a tremendous demand. Only God could provide, and He did- and in abundance! Then Jesus asks: "How many loaves do you have?" he asked. "Go and see." When they found out, they said, "Five—and two fish." (mark 6:38). The Jesus had them sit, blessed the fish and loaves and fed the multitude. There was so much that the disciples picked up "twelve basketfuls of broken pieces of bread and fish" That were left over. (Mark 6:43). The number of men (not the total number that were fed) was "five thousand" (Mark 6:44). How did this happen? Was it, as some have suggested, that the example of generosity by Jesus in offering the small amount of food generate a spirit of giving among the crowd- and caused them to share accordingly? My belief is that this miracle was done- as all are- to give testimony to the glory of God! God is the source of all goodness and abundance- and Jesus is "the Bread of life"! (John 6:35)



Jesus then dismisses the crowd, and tells His disciples to go on ahead of Him, into Bethsaida. He then went to the mountains to pray (Mark 6:45-46). Jesus took every opportunity to pray. If the very Son of God feels the need for constant communication with His Father, then how often

should we pray? Should we "pray without ceasing"? (1 Thess. 5:17) I think the answer is obvious.

"Later that night" Jesus was alone on the shore, and saw the disciples in a boat "straining at the oars, because the wind was against them" (Mark 6:47-48). Jesus then "walked on the lake" and "was about to pass by them" (Mark 6:48) when the disciples saw Jesus, and thought He was a "ghost" (Mark 6:49). This is understandable, since it is rare to see a person walking on water! They were afraid, and cried out, but Jesus comforted them with these words; "Take courage! It is I. Don't be afraid." (Mark 6:50). The wind then "died down" and they were amazed, partly because their "hearts were hardened" and they "had not understood about the loaves" (Mark 6:51-52). I have often wondered how the disciples could show so little faith and understanding when they were confronted daily with clear and unmistakable evidence that Jesus was the Son of God- and that he had control over "sickness and death" and literally "the wind and waves". Yet again and again these men saw but did not understand, and did not allow God to build faith into their hearts and minds- just like us!

When they reached Genesserat, the people immediately gathered because they "recognized Jesus" (Mark 6:54). Many were brought for healing, and many were healed – even those who were able to touch "the edge of His cloak" (Mark 6:56). The touch of Jesus is so powerful- then and now. Many of us would long to touch "the edge of His cloak".

Numbers 18-20 February 27, 2014 Mark 7:1-13

God declares the priesthood to be "a gift" (Num. 18:7). Only the priests are allowed into the "altar and inside the curtain", all others who come "near the sanctuary" are to be put to death. The responsibilities of the Levites was clearly stated:" "You, your

sons and your family are to bear the responsibility for offenses connected with the sanctuary, and you and your sons alone are to bear the responsibility for offenses connected with the priesthood." (Num. 18:1).

The rules, regulations and specifications for offerings was given in Numbers 18:8-32. The portions of the wave offerings was given to the Levites as "your perpetual share" (Num. 18:11). This was certainly a great benefit to God's servants who were in the priestly order, but as God told Aaron:" You will have no inheritance in their land, nor will you have any share among them; I am your share and your inheritance among the Israelites." (Num. 18:20). So there was a tradeoff of sorts- food was provided to the Levites but they had no inheritance of land- because God Himself was "their share".

The ashes of a "red heifer" were to be used as part of the ritual of cleansing (Num. 19:1-10). Some feel this is a foreshadowing or a "type" of Christ's sacrifice. In the reference (http://www.gotquestions.org/red-heifer.html) we find these words: The imagery of the blood of the heifer without blemish being sacrificed and its blood cleansing from sin is a foreshadowing of the blood of Christ shed on the cross for believers' sin. He was "without blemish" just as the red heifer was to be. As the heifer was sacrificed "outside the camp" (Numbers 19:30), in the same way Jesus was crucified outside of Jerusalem: "And so Jesus also suffered outside the city gate to make the people holy through his own blood" (Hebrews 13:11-12).

Water was a constant necessity for the Hebrews as they traveled through the desert for forty years. One of the key concerns when settling in an encampment was the presence of water- for the people as well as for the livestock. In answer to the people's cries and grumbling, and in response to Moses' humbling of himself, the glory of the Lord appeared and said to Moses:" "Take the staff, and you and your brother Aaron gather the assembly together. Speak to that rock before their eyes and it will pour out its water. You will bring water out of the rock for the community so they and their livestock can drink." (Num. 20:8). And Moses di exactly as the Lord commanded- well, almost exactly. Instead of speaking to the rock, Moses "struck the rock twice with his staff" (Num. 20:11). And God immediately responded: "Because you did not trust in me enough to honor me as holy in the sight of the Israelites, you will not bring this community into the land I give them." (Num. 20:12). A small infraction in our eyes, but disobedience in God's eyes. Partial obedience is seen by God as disobedience- when we "hold back" something, trust ourselves rather than God, or change God's clear directions even slightly- for whatever reason- this is disobedience!

Then the Hebrews wanted to pass through the country of Edom, but were refused passage. God's people even offered to pay for any water their livestock drank on their passage through the country, but Edom refused (Num. 20:18-20). The Edomites assembled a "large and powerful army" to prevent their passage through the country, so Israel "turned away from them" (Numbers 20:21). The Edomites were descendants of Jacob's brother Esau (Edom). For this refusal, God promised through the prophet Jeremiah to make this country a desolate wasteland (Jer. 49:7-22) and Ezekiel (Ezek. 25:12-14). An extended discussion of this is found in (http://ldolphin.org/edom.html).

Then the Scripture describes the death of Aaron. He, like Moses, was not to enter the Promised Land. As God said: "He will not enter the land I give the Israelites, because both of you rebelled against my command at the waters of Meribah." (Num. 20:24). Aaron died on the top of Mount Hor. Moses and Eleazar, Aaron's son, descended from the mountain and the Israelites mourned Aaron's passing for thirty

days (Num. 20:29). Aaron's garments were given to and put on Eleazar, symbolic of the passage of responsibility and office of priest being inherited by the son.

Mark 7:1-13

Clean or not? What are the requirements? The Pharisees had a series of strict requirements for something to be "clean" and Jesus and His disciples were in violation of these rules. The Pharisees criticized the disciples saying: "Why don't your disciples live according to the tradition of the elders instead of eating their food with defiled hands?" (Mark 7:5). Jesus challenged their rules and reliance on them for righteousness: "You have a fine way of setting aside the commands of God in order to observe your own traditions! For Moses said, 'Honor your father and mother,' and, 'Anyone who curses their father or mother is to be put to death.' But you say that if anyone declares that what might have been used to help their father or mother is Corban (that is, devoted to God)- then you no longer let them do anything for their father or mother. Thus you nullify the word of God by your tradition that you have handed down. And you do many things like that." (Mark 7:9b-13). Jesus goes on further to say: "Listen to me, everyone, and understand this. Nothing outside a person can defile them by going into them. Rather, it is what comes out of a person that defiles them." (Mark 7:14b-15).

The point Jesus is making is that the real issue of "purity" or "cleanness" is an issue of the heart. If your heart is pure, seeks God, and is obedient to God, then the issue of "clean" and "unclean" food, hands, and the like becomes of secondary concern. The Pharisees had missed the point of the Law- to bring us closer to God- to cause us to meditate on Him and His Law "day and night" (Psalm 1:2).

Numbers 21-22 February 28, 2014 Mark 7:14-37

More opposition from the enemies of Israel- this time the Canaanites under the king of Arad- stood in the way! This time the people (not Moses) plead with God "If you will deliver these people into our hands, we will totally destroy their cities." (Num. 21:2). The Scripture then states that the Lord "listened" and "gave the Canaanites "over to them" (Num. 21:3). Then the people completely destroyed the cities and all the people living in them. Lest we condemn the people (or God) for harshness in this event, we must remember that the foreigners around God's people were a constant distraction and snare for them and led them into idolatrous disobedience! God was simply endorsing the complete removal of this influence!

The people (again) grew "impatient" on the journey, and complained to God, and they spoke against God and against Moses, and said, "Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? There is no bread! There is no water! And we detest this miserable food!"(Num. 21:4-5). Go God sent venomous snakes among them, casing some to die and many to become poisoned and sick. Immediately the people realized they had sinned, so they pled with Moses to "plead" for them. God heard this plea, and the Lord said to Moses: "Make a snake and put it up on a pole; anyone who is bitten can look at it and live." So Moses made a bronze snake and put it up on a pole. Then when anyone was bitten by a snake and looked at the bronze snake, they lived." (Num. 21:8b-9). Many scholars see this bronze snake as a type of Jesus- as He himself states in John's gospel "Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes may have eternal life in him." (John 3:14-15).

The Israelites then continued their guided journey, traveling from Oboth to Ibe Arayam, then to the Zered Valley and to Arnon, where they were in the wildermness leading to Ammonite territory, We then find a reference to the "Book of the Wars of the Lord" (Num. 21:14). According to Wkipedia: "Amongst academics, it is generally thought to be a collection of victory songs or poems, although some readers have suggested it may be a prose military history. David Rosenberg suggests in his The Book of David that it was written in 1100 BCE or thereabouts. It has been suggested by the theologian Joseph Barber Lightfoot that the book was one and the same as the mysterious biblical Book of Jasher." (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Book_of_the_Wars_of_the_Lord).

They continued on to Beer (Num. 21:16) and "Then they went from the wilderness to Mattanah, from Mattanah to Nahaliel, from Nahaliel to Bamoth, and from Bamoth to the valley in Moab where the top of Pisgah overlooks the wasteland." (Num. 21:19-20). It was there in Ammonite territory, near Moab, that the Israelites encountered still another nation unwilling to let them pass though their land. This time it was Sihon king of the Amorites. Even though the king attacked with his "entire army", (Num. 21:23), "Israel, however, put him to the sword and took over his land from the Arnon to the Jabbok, but only as far as the Ammonites, because their border was fortified." (Num. 21:24). Then Moses sent spies to Jazar, and the army of Israel drove out the Amorites from there. Then they turned toward Bashan to meet and oppose Og, the king of Bashan. The Lord assured Moses that he would be victorious:"The Lord said to Moses, "Do not be afraid of him, for I have delivered him into your hands, along with his whole army and his land. Do to him what you did to Sihon king of the Amorites, who reigned in Heshbon." (Num. 21:34). So they struck him down and his army and "leaving them no survivors" (Num. 21:35).

Now the people of Israel were in the plains of Moab, and the king of Moab, Balak, was concerned and fearful (Num. 23:2-4). They decided that they needed a "diviner" so they sent for Balaam. But God asked Balaam "Who are these men with

you?" (Num. 23:9). Balaam told God who they were, and that he was summoned by Balak to "put a curse" on these Israelites so the Edomites could defeat them. (Num. 23:10-11). God then told Ballam: "Do not go with them. You must not put a curse on those people, because they are blessed." (Num. 23:12). Balaam then told Balak's officials: "Go back to your own country, for the Lord has refused to let me go with you." (Num. 23:13). The Edomites were not about to give up, so they summoned other officials, "more numerous and more distinguished" than the first group (Num. 23:15). They pled with Balaam, but he refused- rightfully so, and said that he could not "do anything great or small to go beyond the command of the Lord my God." (Num. 23:18). Balaam waited for a word from God, and was told "Since these men have come to summon you, go with them, but do only what I tell you." (Num. 23:20).

Balaam then set out on his donkey the next day. He must have disobeyed and displeased God, for an angel was sent to oppose him. The donkey could see the angel- so three times the donkey prevented Balaam from encountering the angel of the Lord- but Balaam- not seeing the angel, beats his donkey. This happened three times, and finally God gave the donkey a voice and it asked: "Am I not your own donkey, which you have always ridden, to this day? Have I been in the habit of doing this to you?" (Num. 23:30). After Balaam answers "No" he suddenly sees the angel. The angel tells Balaam that he would have killed him if the donkey had not protected him. Balaam is ashamed of his behavior and confesses "I have sinned. I did not realize you were standing in the road to oppose me. Now if you are displeased, I will go back." (Num. 23:34).

Balak then hears Balaam is coming, and meets him near Arnon. The king reminds Balaam that he was summoned urgently, and that Balaam is going to be well paid for his "duties" of cursing God's people. But Balaam plainly states "But I can't say whatever I please. I must speak only what God puts in my mouth." (Num. 23:38). Balak apparently could not hear any better than some modern leaders, for Balak then performs a sacrifice and goes to where he can see the outskirts of the Hebrew camp.

Mark 7:14-37

The story continues of Jesus' clarification as to which things are "clean and unclean" He tries to clarify His statement with this explanation: "Don't you see that nothing that enters a person from the outside can defile them? For it doesn't go into their heart but into their stomach, and then out of the body." (In saying this, Jesus declared all foods clean.) (Mark 7:18b-19) The Jesus gets to the "heart" of the matter and states "What comes out of a person is what defiles them. For it is from within, out of a person's heart, that evil thoughts come—sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly. All these evils come from inside and defile a person." (Mark 7:21-23).

Jesus then went to Tyre to "a house" and wished to keep His presence a secret, but word got out! (Mark 7:24). There a woman from "Syrian Phonecia" who was a Greek, begged Jesus to cast a demon out of her daughter and heal her. (Mark 7:26). Jesus then replies to the woman, in a way that is at least puzzling and could even be interpreted as sarcastic and uncaring. He said to her: "First let the children eat all they want," he told her, "for it is not right to take the children's bread and toss it to

the dogs." (Mark 7:27). The woman, not to be denied, tells Jesus that: "even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs." (Mark 7:28). Perhaps Jesus was impressed with her persistence, or her advocacy of her daughter, even though they were both Gentiles (called "dogs" by many Jews). Perhaps Jesus was impressed with her humor under pressure, for He then replies "For such a reply, you may go; the demon has left your daughter." (Mark 7:29). And the daughter was healed- the woman went home and found the demon gone (Mark 7:30). Was Jesus tired, or "having a bad day"…or was He simply insisting that His mission was to the "children of Israel"? Whatever the reason, the healing was done!

The Jesus encounters a man in Sidon who was "deaf and could hardly talk" (Mark 7:32)- the man begged Jesus to "place His hand on him". Jesus took him aside, away from the crowd, put His fingers in the man's ears, spit and touched the man's tongue and said "Ephphatha!" (which means "Be opened!"). (Mark 7:34) The Scripture then says the man's ears were opened and his tongue "loosened" and he began to "speak plainly" (Mark 7:35). Jesus then commanded (not suggested) that they tell no one about this healing. However, as was the case so many times, the word of this miracle spread quickly. The people were amazed and impressed and said "He has done everything well," they said. "He even makes the deaf hear and the mute speak." (Mark 7:36-37). Many have wondered (as I have) why Jesus was so insistent on keeping the miracles of healing and "feeding the multitudes" a secret. Surely He knew that word would spread..! Several reasons come to my mind: 1) Satan had already tempted Jesus in the wilderness to be a "miracle worker" and a "feeder of the many" with his temptations to jump from the Temple spire unharmed, or turn a stone into bread- Jesus clearly rejected that temptation then as He does here; 2) the crowds were already large- they may have reached a point where Jesus could not travel, or even pray, with any semblance of privacy or freedom of motion. One can only speculate, He certainly knows the "why" better than I do!

Numbers 23-25 February 29/March1, 2014 Mark 8:1-21

Balaam then had Balak prepare seven altars to sacrifice seven bulls and seven rams. After this sacrifice, Balaam then sought a word from the Lord. "So the Lord put a word in Balaam's mouth" (Num. 23:5) and said: "How can I curse those whom God has not cursed? How can I denounce those whom the Lord has not denounced?" (Num. 23:8). The Balak exclaimed: "What have you done to me? I brought you to curse my enemies, but you have done nothing but bless them!" (Num. 23:11). Still wanting Balaam to curse the Israelites, Balak takes him to another place where they similarly prepare seven altars, this time also sacrificing seven bulls and seven rams. And the message from God is the same (notice a trend here?): "No misfortune is seen in Jacob, no misery observed in Israel. The Lord their God is with them; the shout of the King is among them. God brought them out of Egypt; they have the strength of a wild ox. There is no divination against Jacob, no evil omens against Israel. It will now be said of Jacob and of Israel, 'See what God has done!' (Num. 23:21-23).

So Balak tries again- thinking that maybe if he took him (Balaam) to another place, God would see fit to curse Israel (Num. 23:27). And yet the message is the same! "Their king will be greater than Agag; their kingdom will be exalted. (Num. 24:7) The Balak's anger "burned against Balaam" and he refused to reward Balaam as he had promised (Num. 24:10-11). Balaam's response to Balak's anger is particularly telling: 'Even if Balak gave me all the silver and gold in his palace, I could not do anything of my own accord, good or bad, to go beyond the command of the Lord—

and I must say only what the Lord says'? (Num. 24:13). Balaam was faithful enough, and trusted God enough to say only "what he was told"!

Then the tables turn on Balak. Balaam has another word:" Edom will be conquered; Seir, his enemy, will be conquered, but Israel will grow strong. A ruler will come out of Jacob and destroy the survivors of the city." (Num. 24:18-19). And in a fifth message from God, Balaam prophesies: "Amalek was first among the nations, but their end will be utter destruction." (Num. 24:20) and in a sixth message: "you Kenites will be destroyed when Ashur takes you captive." (Num. 24:22) and a seventh message: "Ships will come from the shores of Cyprus; they will subdue Ashur and Eber, but they too will come to ruin." (Num. 24:24). The Balaam got up and "returned home" and Balak "went his way" (Num. 24:25) Some scholars feel that there is a Messianic prophesy in Numbers 24:17 "A star will come out of Jacob; a scepter will rise out of Israel.". Although Balaam was clearly a believer in God, his prophesies are not regarded by many as false teachings from Eastern religion (http://www.studylight.org/dic/hbd/view.cgi?number=T654).

What Balaam could not accomplish with a curse (or a blessing), the Moabites accomplished by seducing the people of God into following their abominable religion and its practices. As the Scripture states: "While Israel was staying in Shittim, the men began to indulge in sexual immorality with Moabite women, who invited them to the sacrifices to their gods. The people ate the sacrificial meal and bowed down before these gods. So Israel yoked themselves to the Baal of Peor. And the Lord's anger burned against them." (Num. 25:1-3). Baal Peor was one of the pagan gods, often worshipped along with the Queen of Heaven, Asteroth. God's anger was certainly justified- this was the very kind of alliance that could turn God's people away from their sole devotion to Him. The penalty prescribed by Moses was harsh but commensurate with the offense: "Each of you must put to death those of your people who have yoked themselves to the Baal of Peor." (Num. 25:5).

Then one of the elders brings a Midianite woman to the camp "right before the eyes of Moses and the whole assembly of Israel" (Num. 25:6). How could he have done such a thing? The response was swift and sure- "When Phinehas son of Eleazar, the son of Aaron, the priest, saw this, he left the assembly, took a spear in his hand and followed the Israelite into the tent. He drove the spear into both of them, right through the Israelite man and into the woman's stomach. Then the plague against the Israelites was stopped; but those who died in the plague numbered 24,000." (Num. 25:7b-9). Apparently a plague had started- intiiated by God- to punish the Israelites for their idolatry with the Moabites. It is not clear if the Midianite "intrusion" was also a source of the plague, but it was stopped on the death of this erring pair- but not before 24,000 had died! The Scripture identifies the "defiant couple": "The name of the Israelite who was killed with the Midianite woman was Zimri son of Salu, the leader of a Simeonite family. And the name of the Midianite woman who was put to death was Kozbi daughter of Zur, a tribal chief of a Midianite family." (Num. 25:14b-15)

The Lord then clearly identifies the source of His anger as He tells Moses: "Treat the Midianites as enemies and kill them. They treated you as enemies when they deceived you in the Peor incident involving their sister Kozbi, the daughter of a Midianite leader, the woman who was killed when the plague came as a result of that incident." (Num. 25:17b-18). It certainly seems that God was offended enough by the Midianite woman's "deception" and that the plague was sent as a result of this incident. God, however, must have also been deeply offended by the intrusion of the Moabite religion into His people.

Mark 8:1-21

Feeding the multitudes! Dis Jesus have to resist that temptation to ne a "traveling miracle worker", or simply a provider of earthly bread? He certainly did in the wilderness when tempted by Satan. Yet here, as in the feeding of the five thousand (men) Jesus minsters to another great number of folks – here four thousand (men)! Despite the twin temptations of Satan, Jesus here felt that compassion and mercy were clearly called for: "I have compassion for these people; they have already been with me three days and have nothing to eat. If I send them home hungry, they will collapse on the way, because some of them have come a long distance." (Mark 8:2b-3). This time they had "seven loaves" and "a few small fish" (Mark 8:5-7) and the miraculous multiplication of bread and fish took place! The people "ate and were satisfied" and "seven basketfuls of broken pieces" were left over (Mark 8:8)

After the people were dismissed, Jesus and the disciples went by boat to Dalmanutha. There they were questioned by the Pharisees, who asked Jesus for a "sign from heaven" (Mark 8:11). Jesus stated clearly that "no sign will be given" (Mark 8:12) It is worthy to note that Jesus "sighed deeply" (Mark 8:12). So many would make a real human Jesus into a "picture of perfection" that would never exhibit the normal range of human emotions. Yet Jesus wept (a famous short verse popular with children when asked to memorize a verse- John 11:35); He laughed,

enjoyed the company of friends, and showed anger and frustration- all in perfect balance and in perfect emotional health. He was real indeed- He just didn't sin!

Then Jesus asks His disciples to look at the larger picture, beyond mere physical bread and fish. He uses the knowledge they have or bread and bread making to illustrate a point. He said to them "Watch out for the yeast of the Pharisees and that of Herod." (Mark 8:15). The disciples did not understand- they imagined that He was scolding them for not having enough bread to feed the crowds (Mark 8:16). Jesus then has them repeat the facts of the feedings of both the five thousand and four thousand- how much they had originally and how much was left over. (Mark 8:19-20). Jesus then marvels at their "hard hearts" (Mark 8:17) and asks "Do you still not understand?" (Mark 8:21). Clearly the disciples did not understand. But Jesus was patient, and knew He would have to repeat and illustrate many times before His "inner circle" would begin to grasp the mysteries of the Kingdom of God.

Numbers 26-27 March 1, 2014 Mark 8:22-38

Another census! The entire book of numbers is concerned with the "numbers" of the people of Israel. It is a miracle that we might miss that so few were lost in the desert, and that so many survived! Without God's constant presence, supply, and blessing this would not have been true. These numbers were taken after about two generations (about 38 years) had passed, so that "no one" would be left from the unfaithful that doubted God's protection against the inhabitants of the Promised Land- except Joshua and Caleb who were faithful and trusted God. The Scripture states: "These are the ones counted by Moses and Eleazar the priest when they counted the Israelites on the plains of Moab by the Jordan across from Jericho. Not one of them was among those counted by Moses and Aaron the priest when they counted the Israelites in the Desert of Sinai. For the Lord had told those Israelites they would surely die in the wilderness, and not one of them was left except Caleb son of Jephunneh and Joshua son of Nun." (Num. 26:63-65). More about the census taking in Scripture is found at (http://christianity.about.com/od/glossary/qt/Census-Definition.htm) Another fascinating reference is the "Numbers in Numbers" essay presented in (http://www2.math.umd.edu/~jmr/numbers.html). These "numbers" were important not only in evaluating potential military strength but also in the erquitable disctribution of land in the Promised Land, which God's people will enter shortly.

Two daughters of Zelophedad, who were from the tribe of Manasseh, cane forward to Moses asking for a share in the inheritance. They were left as the only living descendants of Zelophedada, who had "died in the wilderness" (Num. 27:3) leaving only these two daughters- there were no sons to claim their father's inheritance. Moses decided to take their case "before the Lord" who then told Moses: "What Zelophehad's daughters are saying is right. You must certainly give them property as an inheritance among their father's relatives and give their father's inheritance to them." (Num. 27:7). God then extended this principle, so that daughters in families with no sons could inherit their father's property. (Num. 27:8-11).

Moses' work was almost completed. He was to do two important things before his work and life was finished: 1) go up to the mountaintop and see the Promised Land; and 2) appoint a worthy successor, so that "the Lord's people will not be like sheep without a shepherd." (Num. 27:17) God's instructions were clear: "Take Joshua son of Nun, a man in whom is the spirit of leadership, and lay your hand on him. Have him stand before Eleazar the priest and the entire assembly and commission him in their presence. Give him some of your authority so the whole Israelite community will obey him. He is to stand before Eleazar the priest, who will obtain decisions for

him by inquiring of the Urim before the Lord. At his command he and the entire community of the Israelites will go out, and at his command they will come in." (Num. 27:18b-21)

Notice that God wanted a man with his "Spirit" – the Holy Spirit, and that had been faithful to God and believed that God would be with them so that they could overcome the obstacles and barriers to occupying the Promised Land. The people living in Jerusalem- the Jebusites- were strong, and lived in walled/fortified cities. Yet Joshua trusted God for victory! So Moses commissioned Joshua and turned over the leadership of God's people and the authority from God to accomplish the tasks before him.

Mark 8:22-38

In Bethsaida Jesus encounters a blind man whose friends begged Jesus to "touch him" (mark 8:22). Jesus led the man "outside the village" and spit on his eyes and touched them asking the man "Do you see anything?" (Mark 8:23). The man replied "I see people; they look like trees walking around." (Mark 8:24). Jesus then put His hands on the man's eyes again- after which the man "saw everything clearly" (Mark 8:25), and Jesus told him not to "go into the village" (Mark 8:26). Some translations render this phrase "go and tell anyone in the village", which would be consistent with Jesus' attempts to have a "low profile" ministry. Some have speculated that this healing, since it was not spontaneous and complete but was in stages, is an example of another pattern in God's healing work. Some are healed completely and instantly, and many more are healed but in stages over time.

Jesus then tells His disciples (again!) "that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests and the teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and after three days rise again." (Mark 8:31). He told them about this "plainly", but Peter took Him aside and "began to rebuke Him" (Mark 8:32). Jesus then admonished Peter: "Get behind me, Satan!" he said. "You do not have in mind the concerns of God, but merely human concerns." (Mark 8:33)- this rebuke was done in the presence of the other disciples! In Matthew's account of (what must be) the same event, Jesus has just asked "Who do you say that I am?" and Peter identifies Jesus as the Messiah. Jesus then states that He will build His church on this "rock"- which Catholic believers interpret as Peter himself (the first Pope of the church) and Protestants identify as the FAITH of Peter. Regardless, Jesus tells Peter that this " was not revealed to you by flesh and blood, but by my Father in heaven.". (Matt. 16:17). How quickly Peter moves from being the "rock" to being Satan- and therein is the terrible tragedy of all of us- one minute believing and proclaiming that Jesus is Lord, the next moment denying Him with our actions and attitudes. Oh for the great gift of a consistent walk with the Lord!

Then Jesus call “the crowd” to Him along with the disciples (Mark 8:34) and says: “Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me and for the gospel will save it. What good is it for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul? Or what can anyone give in exchange for their soul? If anyone is ashamed of me and my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, the Son of Man will be ashamed of them when he comes in his Father’s glory with the holy angels.” (Mark 34b-38) What an amazing challenge- for us to “lose our life” to save it! This is truly a “hard saying/teaching” of Jesus, but it contains the very heart of the call of Jesus and His demands on our lives. If we truly believe Him to be our Good Shepherd, then we can follow Him wherever he leads, with joy and abandon. Who better to lead us through life- who has a better plan- who loves us more- who is always with us- Jesus!

Numbers 28-29 March 2, 2014 Mark 9:1-29

“His tithes and our offerings” we say as we collect monetary offerings in our church services. We are under the New Covenant, so we (safely we assume!) ignore the rules and regulations given by God in the Old Testament. Surely God does not expect us to follow these prescribed practices! Even so, the prophecy in Ezekiel about the New Temple- which has not yet been fulfilled- describes the giving of offerings similar to those described here. My personal opinion is that the New Temple is an extension of the old sacrificial system for those still operating under the old covenant- who are still God’s people but do not know Jesus as Messiah.

The offerings and rituals here can be summarized as follows: 1) daily offerings; 2) Sabbath offerings; and 3) monthly offerings. The observances here are: 1) the Passover; 2) the Festival of Weeks; 3) the Festival of Trumpets; 4) the Day of Atonement; and 5) the Festival of Tabernacles (or Booths). These are still observed by faithful Jews (see: http://www.hebrew4christians.com/Holidays/Fall_Holidays/Sukkot/sukkot.html). As is stated in the following reference: “As Israel is preparing themselves to enter into Canaan and possess the land at this point in Numbers, it is important for them to have an impeccable relationship with God. Their prescribed offerings to God are restated here in Numbers 28-29 to keep before them their dependence on God.” (http://www.bibletrack.org/cgi-bin/bible.pl?incr=1&mo=3&dy=28)

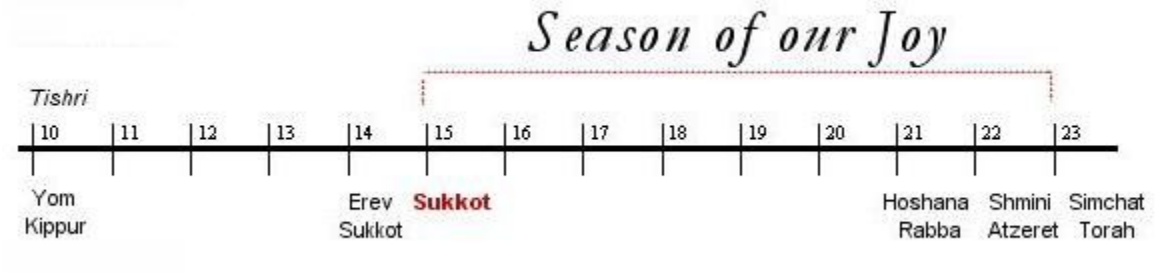
These Festivals and observances are summarized in the following charts, with the Gregorian calendar equivalents to the numbered months (http://www.bibletrack.org/cgi-bin/bible.pl?incr=1&mo=3&dy=28).

God expects, and demands, and deserves, our best- and this is just as true now as then when the sacrifices represented the finest, the best, and the first- all symbols of devotion and dedication to the Lord.

Most often, only the numbers of the months are mentioned in the Old Testament. The months of the Jewish calendar are designated as follows:

Month Name	Month Number	Number of Days	Gregorian Equivalent
Nisan	1	30 days	March-April
Iyar	2	29 days	April-May
Sivan	3	30 days	May-June
Tammuz	4	29 days	June-July
Av	5	30 days	July-August
Elul	6	29 days	August-September
Tishri	7	30 days	September-October
Cheshvan	8	29 or 30 days	October-November
Kislev	9	30 or 29 days	November-December
Tevet	10	29 days	December-January
Shevat	11	30 days	January-February
Adar (Adar I in leap years, see below)	12	30 days	February-March
Adar II (leap years only, see below)	13 in leap years	29 days	February-March

Leap years: A second month called Adar is added in the 3rd, 6th, 8th, 11th, 14th, 17th and 19th years of a 19-year cycle. In those leap years, Adar is called Adar I and the extra month of 29 days is called Adar II.



Mark 9:1-29

Mark 9 begins with what some regard as a controversial statement- or worse still- evidence for the untrustworthiness of Jesus' words and understanding in particular and the whole of Scripture in general. Some critics have posited that Jesus did not understand the true nature or timing of the coming of the Kingdom of God "in power". The interpretation by these critics basically amounts to this- Jesus may have truly believed that His second coming was imminent, but He was limited in His knowledge and inadvertently- and in good faith- told His followers an untruth. As stated in 2 Peter 3:3-4, there have always been what the Bible refers to as "scoffers". This modern criticism is just another version of this same untruth listed in 2 Peter! The TRUTH is that the Kingdom of God did come "in power" when the Holy Spirit empowered simple, common men and women to speak in languages they did not know, to boldly testify before leaders of men and to face persecution and death through the Power of God's Holy Spirit! What God promises, He always

delivers! So now we can read with joy and understanding (at least partial understanding) Jesus' words: "Truly I tell you, some who are standing here will not taste death before they see that the kingdom of God has come with power." (Mark 9:1)

Jesus then led Peter, James and John to "a high mountain, where they were all alone" (Mark 9:2). Then an amazing thing happens…! Jesus was changed in appearance to dazzling white, radiating light all around Him. "And there appeared before them Elijah and Moses, who were talking with Jesus." (Mark 9:4). Could it be that this was the first time that these disciples saw Jesus as He truly was (and is!)? They were certainly overwhelmed, frightened, filled with joy and amazement as evidenced by Peter's words: *"Rabbi, it is good for us to be here. Let us put up three shelters—one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah." (He did not know what to say, they were so frightened.) (Mark 9:5-6)* Then the disciples hear a voice "out of a cloud"- much like the one reported in Matthew's gospel (Matt. 3:17) saying: "This is my Son, whom I love. Listen to him!" (Mark 9:7). We remember the "cloud" that appeared over the Tabernacle in Moses' time- a clear sign of the presence of God, and the words that came "from heaven" and in the form of a dove (symbol for the Holy Spirit): *"This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased." (Matt. 3:17).* God is affirming- again- the unique nature and deity of His own Son- in a clear voice so that those with Him could hear and understand.

Then they “looked around” and “no longer saw anyone with them except Jesus” (Mark 9:8). Then they came “down the mountain”. We want to stay with Jesus on the mountaintop- but He calls us to the valley where there is Kingdom work to do! Jesus then ordered them not to “tell anyone what they had seen” until Jesus “rose from the dead” (Mark 9:9). They did as Jesus asked, but had a discussion about what “rising from the dead” really meant (Mark 9:10). Were they so slow that they did not remember Jesus words of warning about His own death, and the promise of His resurrection? Then they ask Jesus a question: *“Why do the teachers of the law say that Elijah must come first?” (Mark 9:11)* Jesus’ answer, at first listening, seems to be indirect or even puzzling: *“To be sure, Elijah does come first, and restores all things. Why then is it written that the Son of Man must suffer much and be rejected? But I tell you, Elijah has come, and they have done to him everything they wished, just as it is written about him.” (Mark 9:12b-13).* Elijah has come first- both as Elijah himself and as John the Baptists- and the people did indeed treat Elijah poorly (as they did John as well).

Then Jesus heals a boy that is “possessed by a spirit”. The disciples had tried to heal him, but were unable to (Mark 9:18b). There had been an argument going on between the disciples and “the teachers of the law” (Mark 9:13). Jesus words are: “You unbelieving generation,” Jesus replied, “how long shall I stay with you? How long shall I put up with you? Bring the boy to me.” (Mark 9:19). When the boy was brought to Jesus, the spirit: “saw Jesus, it immediately threw the boy into a convulsion. He fell to the ground and rolled around, foaming at the mouth.” (Mark 9:20). The follows a very poignant conversation between Jesus and the boy’s father: “Jesus asked the boy’s father, “How long has he been like this?” “From childhood,” he answered. “It has often thrown him into fire or water to kill him. But if you can do anything, take pity on us and help us.” “‘If you can’?” said Jesus. “Everything is possible for one who believes.” Immediately the boy’s father exclaimed, “I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!” (Mark 9:21-24)

Jesus rebukes the spirit, which “shrieked” and “came out” (Mark 9:26). The boy was so overcome by this violent “leaving” that some there thought he was dead (Mark 9:26). But Jesus takes the boy “by the hand” and “he stood up”. (Mark 9:27). Somewhat later, after Jesus had “gone indoors”, the disciples asked Him privately “Why couldn’t we drive it out?” Jesus’ answer is an indictment of the disciples’ spiritual lives “That kind can only come out by prayer” (Mark 9:29). Some translations render the phrase “by prayer and fasting”. So Jesus is showing the disciples how important their devotion- prayer and fasting- really is to a powerful, Spirit filled life. He calls us that same life today.

Numbers 30-31 March 3, 2014 Mark 9:30-50

Vows, promises, pledges- whatever you may label them- these are part of the “glue” that holds us together in trust as a society. The Scripture here takes a position that to the modern reader seems “sexist”- that is, it puts less value on the judgment of a young woman than her father, or less value on the vows of a married woman than her husband. We must remember that the culture in which this Scripture was recorded is strongly paternalistic. We live under the New Covenant, in which *“There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.” (Gal. 3:28).* Even so, there is wisdom in consulting with an older (and hopefully wiser) parent or a husband with her wife in the making of vows. The Scripture takes the position that if the parent or husband does not “say anything” or “forbid” or “nullify” the vow, then it will stand (Num. 30:3-15).

Then we come to the ugly matter of “revenge on the Midianites”. You may remember that Moses himself had a Midianite wife. The killing of these people, and the sparing only of the “young virgins” may seem to be completely repulsive and inconsistent with the God that we know anfd love. Some authors have struggled with this and offered the following:

"And Moses said to them, “Have you spared all the women? “Behold, these caused the sons of Israel, through the counsel of Balaam, to trespass against the Lord in the matter of Peor, so the plague was among the congregation of the Lord. “Now therefore, kill every male among the little ones, and kill every woman who has known man intimately. “But all the girls who have not known man intimately, spare for yourselves," (Numbers 31:15-18).

The harsh command is what God told Moses to do. "Take full vengeance for the sons of Israel on the Midianites..." (Num. 31:2). But why would God order this and even have children killed?

In Numbers 24 the people of Israel had played the harlot with the daughters of Moab and served Baal, a false god. But this idolatry, though bad enough, was accompanied by the pagan and licentious practices of the pagan women who were seducing the people of God. This would ultimately result in the destruction of Israel as well as the destruction of the messianic line.

God is often so strong in the Old Testament, even ordering the killing of people so that he might ensure that the future messianic line would remain intact. The enemy, Satan, began his attempt to destroy God's people in the Garden of Eden, by also trying to corrupt the world (which led to Noah's Flood), by trying to destroy Israel with attacking armies, and by encouraging Israel to fall into idolatry by exposure to other cultures as well as intermarrying women from those cultures. The result of both the idolatry and the interbreeding would have been the failure of the prophecies that foretold of the coming Messiah which specified which family line the Messiah would come through. The Messiah, Jesus, would be the one who would die for the sins of the world and without that death there would be no atonement. Without the atonement, all people would be lost. So, God was ensuring the arrival of the Messiah via the destruction of the ungodly.

*This is why God ordered the destruction of this nation. It was pagan, participated in vile and grotesque sins, was idolatrous, and was posing a serious threat to the national identity and sanctity of Israel. (*http://carm.org/bible-difficulties/genesis-deuteronomy/why-would-god-order-destruction-women-and-children*).*

The five kings of Midian, as well as Balaam, were killed: “They fought against Midian, as the Lord commanded Moses, and killed every man.8 Among their victims were Evi, Rekem, Zur, Hur and Reba—the five kings of Midian. They also killed Balaam son of Beor with the sword. (Num. 31:7-8). The presumed motive for this “vengeance” against Midian and the women of Midian in particular is given as “They (the women) were the ones who followed Balaam’s advice and enticed the Israelites to be unfaithful to the Lord in the Peor incident, so that a plague struck the Lord’s people.” (Num. 31:16). So the issue fundamentally is one of the purity of God’s people, and the maintenance of the bloodline that was to ultimately yield the Messiah. However, in listing Jesus genealogy, there are two women included Rahab (a prostitute) and Ruth (a Moabite)! (Matthew 1:5). We wonder why God would be so particular in keeping the bloodline intact in this instance, and so “flexible” in the matter of the eartlhy lineage of His Son. This is certainly a mystery!

The spoils of war (Num. 31:32-47) are then divided, and some of the spoils are offered to the Lord- “16,750 shekels” of gold (Num. 31:52).

Mark 9:30-50

Jesus tried to be clear to His disciples as to the path He would ultimately take on this earth. This discourse is the second time Jesus had warned them that He would be killed by His enemies: *“The Son of Man is going to be delivered into the hands of men. They will kill him, and after three days he will rise.” (Mark 9:31).* The Scripture than states that the disciples were “did not understand” and “were afraid to ask Him about it” (Mark 9:32). Were they afraid because they feared that they also would be killed? Were they afraid because the “knew” that Jesus was to be the King of Israel? The latter may well be true, for they were asked by Jesus: *“What were you arguing about on the road?” (Mark 9:33)*. The Scripture than states that they “ kept quiet” because they had been arguing about who among them would be “greatest”. (Mark 9:34)

Jesus seized this as a “teaching moment” and He said: “Anyone who wants to be first must be the very last, and the servant of all.” (Mark 9:35). The Jesus added: “Whoever welcomes one of these little children in my name welcomes me; and whoever welcomes me does not welcome me but the one who sent me.” (Mark 9:36). Jesus is teaching that the Kingdom of God is a world “upside down and backwards”- where the last- the servant is first, and that those who are powerless- the children- are representatives of Jesus Himself. When we welcome and care for one of “these little children”- those who the world does not value or treasure- we are caring for the “least and the lost”- the very list that Jesus later describes as the “sheep” in the gospel of Matthew: *“‘Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.’ “Then the righteous will answer him, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?’ “The King will reply, ‘Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.’” (Matthew 25:34-40)*

So it matters eternally how we treat those around us, especially those that need special care! Our judgment will depend on our active caring and help that we give to these that God loves as much as the “rich and powerful”!

The Scripture then deals with inclusiveness- do we need to all be on the same exact page theologically to minister and care for God’s children? The answer seems to be “no”: *“we saw someone driving out demons in your name and we told him to stop, because he was not one of us.” “Do not stop him,” Jesus said. “For no one who does a miracle in my name can in the next moment say anything bad about me, for whoever is not against us is for us. Truly I tell you, anyone who gives you a cup of water in my name because you belong to the Messiah will certainly not lose their reward.” (Matthew 9:38b-41).* So many times we do not “join together” with other Christians because we differ in interpretation of Baptism, of Communion practice, or some other issue- when we ought to join together to serve God. Wesley said it best “Though we cannot think alike, may we not love alike? May we not be of one heart, though we are not of one opinion? Without all doubt, we may. Herein all the children of God may unite, notwithstanding these smaller differences.” Also notice that this

passage of Scripture describes a “reward”. The “old time religion” version of this is “stars on your heavenly crown”. A more modern interpretation might be this: Those who choose to love, give, and actively follow God are AHEAD of those of us who do not, or do so to a lesser degree. When we reach Heaven those who have “practiced” more will be rewarded by a greater closeness to God, a greater appreciation of the Mind and Heart of God. That will be our “reward”.

The last part of Mark 9 deals with two difficult subjects- causing “little ones” to stumble or parts of our physical being that cause us to stumble, and also the nature of “saltiness” (Mark 9:42-50). The little ones are not always little children- Paul writes later in his letters to the Romans and Corinthians similar passages (Rom. 14:13-23;1 Cor. 8:13). We should not hinder another’s faith by our careless actions. Our freedom in Christ is not absolute, we must be wise in our choices.

Mark 9:43-45 has been interpreted literally by some. The intent of this passage seems to be to shock us by extreme examples into realizing how difficult the Christian life is and how subject to sin we are. I would hope that no rational person would “cut off” his or her hand or foot (Mark 9:43,45). The seriousness of sin, however, seems to be the point of this teaching of Jesus. There are worse things than having a single foot or eye- separation from God forever in Hell! Lastly, Jesus deals with our role in the world. We are to be “salt” (Mark 9:50). And “salt is good: but “if it loses its saltiness, how can you make it salty again?” We are to be salt and light, and to be useful to God in providing “His flavor” to the world.

Numbers 32-33 March 4, 2014 Mark 10:1-31

We need land- pasture land- so we don't want to cross the Jordan River! This is a loose paraphrase of the request/demand made by the Gadites and Reubenite. This was because they had vast flocks, and the needs that accompany them (Num. 32:1-5). The problem was that God had ordered His people to cross the Jordan and prepare for their conquest and entry to the Promised Land. Did they dare risk angering God again, as they had almost 40 years previous when they lost heart and did not take the Land? Moses' reply to them was a challenge to their obedience and valor: *"Should your fellow Israelites go to war while you sit here? Why do you discourage the Israelites from crossing over into the land the Lord has given them? This is what your fathers did when I sent them from Kadesh Barnea to look over the land. After they went up to the Valley of Eshkol and viewed the land, they discouraged the Israelites from entering the land the Lord had given them. The Lord's anger was aroused that day and he swore this oath: 'Because they have not followed me wholeheartedly, not one of those who were twenty years old or more when they came up out of Egypt will see the land I promised on oath to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob— not one except Caleb son of Jephunneh the Kenizzite and Joshua son of Nun, for they followed the Lord wholeheartedly.' The Lord's anger burned against Israel and he made them wander in the wilderness forty years, until the whole generation of those who had done evil in his sight was gone*." (Num. 32:6b-13) From God's perspective, only Caleb and Joshua were willing to trust God enough to follow His guidance and take the land promised to them.

A compromise was reached- the Reubenites and Gadites stated: *"We would like to build pens here for our livestock and cities for our women and children. But we will arm ourselves for battle[a] and go ahead of the Israelites until we have brought them to their place. Meanwhile our women and children will live in fortified cities, for protection from the inhabitants of the land.* (Num. 32-16b-17). Moses agreed, but warned them: *"But if you fail to do this, you will be sinning against the Lord; and you may be sure that your sin will find you out. Build cities for your women and children, and pens for your flocks, but do what you have promised."* (Num. 32:23-24). And so these tribes obeyed Moses and God, fortifying and renaming cities in the lands they had selected. (Num. 32:34-42).

Numbers 33 is a listing of "stages"- the stages of movement of the various tribes from Rameses in Egypt (Num. 33:3) to the plains of Moab (Num. 33:50) and all the major encampments in between. Why is this detail recounted and catalogued? What is the point of this "road map" of the travels of God's people? In my view there are two answers: 1) the record of the travels of God's people is a reminder of the faithful following of God's leading- by "fire at night" and by "cloud at day". Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it (George Santayana) So many times God's people put a marker- a stone, a wall, a pile of stones- at a point that they needed to remember. The forty years wandering was a direct result of disobedience- and God's people needed to remember it! 2) the record of these travels was also a reminder of the amazing provision of God. Despite the fact that the journey was started from disobedience, God showed His grace and mercy throughout this long journey: *"Your clothing did not wear out on you and your foot did not swell during these forty years ."* (Deut 8:4).

Now that the Hebrews were ready (finally!) to enter the Land, God gave them this reminder: *'When you cross the Jordan into Canaan, drive out all the inhabitants of the land before you. Destroy all their carved images and their cast idols, and demolish all their high places.* (Num. 33:51b-52). God's people were to "drive out" the inhabitants of Canaan, or there would be serious consequences: *those you allow to remain will become barbs in your eyes and thorns in your sides. They will give you trouble in the land where you will live. 56 And then I will do to you what I plan to do to them.'"* (Num. 33:55b-56). This was a prediction that unfortunately came true. The Hebrews did not completely drive out the Canaanites, and the purity of God's people- their blood line and their worship- was compromised.

Mark 10:1-31

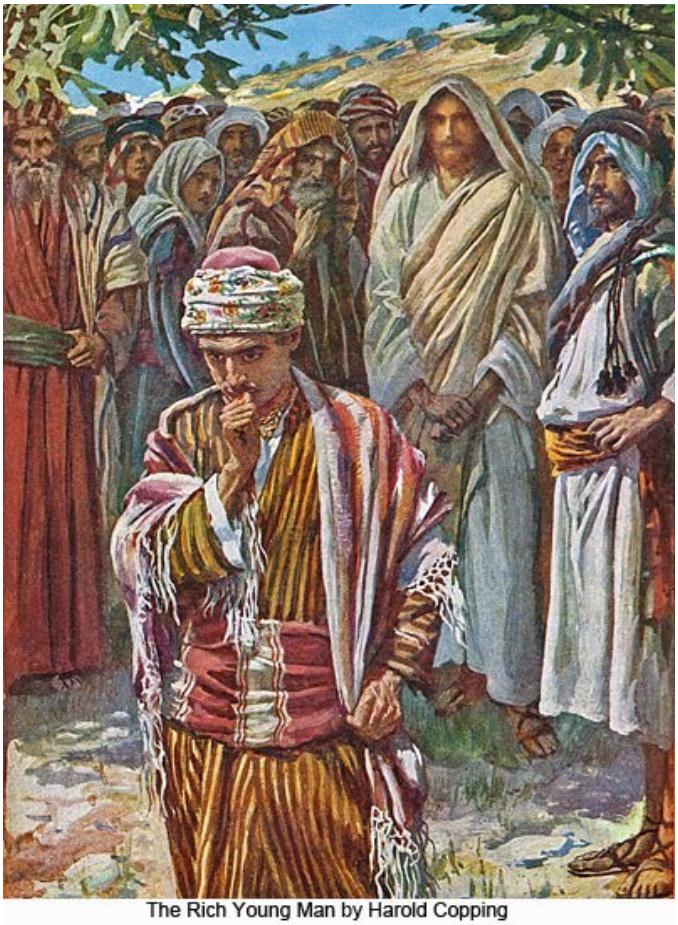
Divorce- an ugly reality always, but allowed- according to the Pharisees: "Moses permitted a man to write a certificate of divorce and send her away." (Mark 10:4). Notice two things about this pronouncement- it was a "permitted" action- not a "recommended" or "commendable" action, and the issuing of a certificate of divorce was an improvement over simple abandonment of the (former) spouse. Notice also that it was the "man" doing the rejection, not the woman. Jesus wanted the "teachers of the law" to see that this was an exception granted out of God's recognition of our sin and selfishness. Marriage was meant to be binding- (Gen. 2:24; Matt. 19:5) and not tossed aside for less than godly reasons. Having endured a divorce myself- I can give a hearty "Amen" to this. Divorce is an ugly reality, with "survivors" rather than "winners" and "losers" and becomes not a "solution to a problem" but a "source of new problems"- especially if children are involved! Mark 10:6-9 reinforces this strongly: *"But at the beginning of creation God 'made them male and female.' 'For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh.' So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate."*

Jesus doesn't stop there- he states that anyone (man or woman) marrying a divorced person "commits adultery" because in God's eyes the original two persons are still married. In other passages we find the "grounds for divorce" or more correctly, the "allowable reasons" for divorce- 1) adultery (Matthew 5:32 and 19:9) and 2) desertion (1 Corinthians 7:15). We must realize that these are exceptions, and that God "hates divorce" (Malachi 2:16).

Then some children are brought to Jesus. I would imagine that children were naturally drawn to Jesus because of His goodness, kindness and emotional availability. Many of us who are "grown children" are attracted to Him for the same

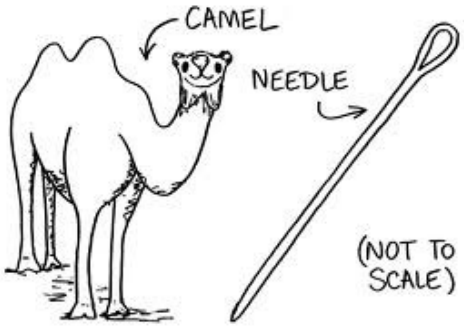
reasons. Jesus then goes on to say: *“Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these. Truly I tell you, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it.”* (Mark 10:14b-15) Jesus is not saying that we should all remain children in the sense of immaturity- we are to grow into Him- but that we, like children, should have a simple trust of Jesus and our Heavenly Father.

The next event recorded in Mark is found in the three synoptic gospels- Mark, Matthew and Luke. Each telling of the story adds a dimension to the man approaching Jesus. Mark 10:22 records that the man was one who had “great wealth”. Matthew 19:22 tells us he was “young” and Luke 18:18 identifies him as a “ruler”. Mark’s telling of this story gives us an insight into Jesus’ style of interaction- when Jesus is called “good rabbi” he reminds the man that “No one is good- except God alone” (Mark 10:18). It is puzzling to me that Jesus would not accept the label “good”, except for the fact that Jesus is pointing to His father as the source of all goodness (including His), and is trying to get the young man to see the critical importance of the commandments to a righteous life. Jesus tells the young man that he “knows” the commandments, and then Jesus lists several of them: *‘You shall not murder, you shall not commit adultery, you shall not steal, you shall not give false testimony, you shall not defraud, honor your father and mother.’”* (Mark 10:19) Then comes a statement- an assertion- from the young man that shows his true lack of understanding, and his naïve assessment of his own “goodness”: *“Teacher,” he declared, “all these I have kept since I was a boy.”* (Mark 10:20). Had this young man kept ALL the commandments? Had he broken even one of them at any time? He seemed to think so, and was relying on his own perfection in keeping the law to justify himself. Yet he knew something was lacking, and he had come to Jesus for answers. This may be one of the many reasons why Jesus “looked at him and loved him.” (Mark 10:21). The Jesus gets to the heart of the matter- this young man’s reliance on his wealth instead of God was the obstacle to his full surrender to God, and Jesus tells him simply *“One thing you lack,” he said. “Go, sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.”* (Mark 10:21). And the young man’s “face fell” and “he went away sad, for he had great wealth” (Mark 10:22).



The Rich Young Man by Harold Copping

Then Jesus "looked around" and said to His disciples *"How hard it is for the rich to enter the Kingdom of God"* (Mark 10:23). Jesus said it was easier for a camel to go through "the eye of a needle" than for a rich person to enter the Kingdom. Some scholars point to this passage as evidence for Jesus' sense of humor, for the "needle" referred to here is also a "city gate opening" which was very narrow, but would allow even a large animal to pass through after a lot of maneuvering and twisting. (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Eye_of_a_needle). There is, however, no historical evidence for such a gate. The later part of this passage also casts doubt on this interpretation, since Jesus says soon after: *"With man this is impossible, but not with God; all things are possible with God."* (Mark 10:27) The question raised by the disciples "Who then can be saved" is a key question in Scripture. The disciples knew they had left "home and family" and faced "persecution" (Mark 10:29-30). Peter said simple "We have left everything to follow you" (Mark 10:28). Jesus is clear- by making God first in their lives, and by faithfully following Him, they would *"receive a hundred times as much in this present age: homes, brothers, sisters, mothers, children and fields—along with persecutions—and in the age to come eternal life."* (Mark 10:30). But Jesus cautions them "many who are first will be last, and the last first." (Mark 10:31). The order of righteousness and Godliness is measured not by our perception of being "first"- in the spotlight/limelight-receiving praise and honor or recognition for our own righteousness, but those who are "last" who serve humbly and with a true servant's heart- will be the most honored!



Numbers 34-36 March 5, 2014 Mark 10:32-52

"Good fences make good neighbors" or so goes the old saying, quotes by Robert Frost in his poem "The Mending Wall". The boundaries of the Promised Land are given here in detail by God to His people (Num. 34:3-12). It is interesting to see some of the names of the tribal leaders listed- notable Joshua and Eleazar in overall leadership (Num. 34:17) and Caleb as a tribal leader (Num. 34:19). The land was to be divided "by lot as an inheritance" (Num. 34:13) which means that the priest was instrumental in the division and assignment of this long awaited living space.

The Levites were to be given towns and "cities of refuge" (Num. 35:6), so that a person who had "killed someone" might flee. Additionally, the Levites were assigned forty two "other towns" (Num. 35:6), together with pasturelands. These cities of refuge were places the accused could live until their trial- this only applied to a person who had killed "accidentally" (Num. 35:15). Those who were "murderers", who intentionally killed someone, were deserving of the death penalty (Num. 35:30), but only on the testimony of two witnesses. Following these prescriptions and rules is a very interesting statement from God: *"'Do not pollute the land where you are. Bloodshed pollutes the land, and atonement cannot be made for the land on which blood has been shed, except by the blood of the one who shed it. Do not defile the land where you live and where I dwell, for I, the Lord, dwell among the Israelites.'"* (Num. 35:33-34) This sheds some light on the destruction of the Midianites, as ordered by God in Numbers 31. The warriors who had killed almost every Midianite were ordered to stay outside the camp for a period of time, so that they would not make the encampment ceremonially unclean. This may mean that there was an element of murder in the elimination of the Midianites. This is another of the many mysteries of the Scripture!

Lastly, the Book of Numbers deals with the inheritance of the daughters of Zelophedad (Num. 36:2-4). They had originally been denied an inheritance because no living sons were left, so God made a provision for their inheritance as well. However, if they were to marry someone fom another tribe, their portion of the inheritance was to go to that tribe (Num. 36:3-4). Only if the women married a person from their own tribe was the land to remain. God was clear in His directions: "No inheritance may pass from one tribe to another, for each Israelite tribe is to keep the land it inherits." (Num. 36:9).

The book of Numbers ends with this statement: *"These are the commands and regulations the Lord gave through Moses to the Israelites on the plains of Moab by the Jordan across from Jericho."* (Num. 36:13). God has spoken- we must follow His leadership and be blessed beyond "anything we can ask or imagine" (Eph 3:20).

Mark 10:32-52

Jesus predicts His death- a third time! (Mark 10:33-34). We sometimes wonder why Jesus did this so many times, but we then remember the surprise of the disciples when the very predictions of Jesus came true- just as he had said! One almost thinks they didn't really hear, or that they were all men and weren't paying attention, or that Jesus' words didn't fit what they wanted to believe- that he would be the King of Israel- their King (on this earth).

James and John then make a very bold request: *"Teacher," they said, "we want you to do for us whatever we ask."* (Mark 10:35). Jesus then asks *"What do you want Me to do for you?"* And their reply: *"Let one of us sit at your right and the other at your left in your glory."* (Mark 10: 36-37) So even those closest to Jesus, who SHOULD have known and understood what He was calling them to do and to be, were seeking glory for themselves- a position of honor and power when Jesus reaches His "glory". Jesus must have been sad, discouraged, frustrated or any of many emotions at this request. His Kingdom was not about "glory"- but they did not understand! Then Jesus asks them *"Can you drink the cup I drink or be baptized with the baptism I am baptized with?"* (Mark 10:38) They confidently answered "We can" (Mark 10:39). The Jesus states to them that they will indeed drink the cup and be baptized as He would be- but this is a pronouncement and prophesy of the persecution, suffering , and death they are to endure- not the "glory" they were expecting. Does this mean that Jesus was cruel? Absolutely not- He was being honest and trying to ground them in reality, not dreams- trying to see His way for what it was and is- not what they wanted it to be.

Naturally the ten other disciples were upset that James and John had requested a special place of honor. Jesus told them that they should not be like the "rulers of the Gentiles" (Mark 10:42) who "lord it over them". In God's Kingdom, "whoever wants to be first must be slave of all." (Mark 10:44). Jesus goes on to illustrate this with His own life and mission: *"For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."* (Mark 10:45)

Then Jesus and His disciples encounter a blind man "Bar Timmaus" or "Son of Timmaus" (Mark 10:46). The man found out who was present, and he was excited- this One could heal him and make him whole so: *"When he heard that it was Jesus of Nazareth, he began to shout, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!"* (Mark 10:47) Many began "to rebuke him"- I would imagine that they did not want this important Teacher to have to bother with "another blind beggar"- but Jesus' compassion caused Him to ask this man "What do you want me to do for you?" (Mark 10:51) These were the same words that Jesus used with James and John. Here, though, they reflect the request of one asking not from desire for power or recognition but from one desperate for healing. Jesus' reply is simple "Go, your faith has healed you." And the man was healed immediately! His faith was they key.

Deuteronomy 1,2 March 6, 2014 Mark 11:1-19

We have been here long enough…time to enter the Promised Land! This was the proclamation of Moses as he recounted what God had said: "Go in and take possession of the land the Lord swore he would give to your fathers—to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob—and to their descendants after them." (Deut. 1:8). And so God's people started their move from Mount Horeb to the land now occupied by the Canaanites and that would become the Land of Promise!

Moses then retells some of the story that God's people have just been through. .how he had complained to God about his great burden, and the plan to choose "wise and

respected" men to help Moses rule over them. God's affirmation of this plan was comforting ""What you propose to do is good." (Deut. 1:14). These men were a system of judges, over "thousands, of hundreds, of fifties and of tens and as tribal officials." (Deut. 1:15). Moses would be the final arbiter of cases that were "too hard" (Deut. 1:17).

Spies were sent out- 12 in number, and they were to report back to Moses. He gave them encouragement in a phrase heard often in Deuteronomy and Joshua "Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged."(Deut. 1:21). The report that came back was encouraging "It is a good land that the Lord our God is giving us." (Deut. 1:25). Yet the people refused to go- for ten of the twelve were convinced they could not overcome the inhabitants of the Land. Instead of trusting God- who had promised He would deliver the land, the people excused their disobedience by saying: 'The people are stronger and taller than we are; the cities are large, with walls up to the sky. We even saw the Anakites there.'" (Deut. 1:28). Moses reminded them of God's faithful deliverance and power *""Do not be terrified; do not be afraid of them. The Lord your God, who is going before you, will fight for you, as he did for you in Egypt, before your very eyes, and in the wilderness. There you saw how the Lord your God carried you, as a father carries his son, all the way you went until you reached this place."* (Deut. 1:29b-31) God's anger and frustration led Him to declare "No one from this evil generation shall see the good land I swore to give your ancestors, except Caleb son of Jephunneh. He will see it, and I will give him and his descendants the land he set his feet on, because he followed the Lord wholeheartedly." (Deut. 1:35b-36). God also stated that Joshua :son of Nun" would enter the Promised Land when the days of wandering in the wilderness were over (Deut. 1:38). The people then regretted their decision (maybe when they realized they were facing what amounted to desert exile). They decided to fight the Amorites "on their own". Of course, this did not work since God had removed His approval and blessing and the Amorites "chased you like a swarm of bees and beat you down from Seir all the way to Hormah." (Deut. 1:44). Then the people "wept bitterly" but God ignored their tears- they had been told what to do, disobeyed by not doing it, and then cried over their failed attempt to conquer the land without God! It's no wonder God "paid no attention to your weeping and turned a deaf ear to you." (Deut. 1:45).

The people then went by the Red (Reed) Sea, and into the land of the descendants of Esau, in Seir (Deut. 2:2-6) God told them not to fight with these people, and to pay for their food and water consumed during their passage. Then God's people passed through the land of the Moabites. God warned them "Do not harass the Moabites or provoke them to war, for I will not give you any part of their land. I have given Ar to the descendants of Lot as a possession." (Deut. 2:9). Interestingly, no mention is made in this account of the troubles that Moab gave the Israelites, as is recorded in Numbers 23-25. The people then crossed the Zered Valley (Deut. 2:13).

Thirty eight years passes, until the people who had opposed God's direction were eliminated. The Scripture tells us "*By then, that entire generation of fighting men had perished from the camp, as the Lord had sworn to them. 15 The Lord's hand was against them until he had completely eliminated them from the camp."* (Deut. 2:14b-15). The people were not to war with the Ammonites (Deut. 2:19), but they were to engage "Sihon the Amorite, king of Heshbon." (Deut. 2:34). God promised that he would strike "terror and fear" into the enemies of Israel.

When the army of Israel met Sihon, then "the LORD our God delivered him over to us and we struck him down, together with his sons and his whole army." (Deut. 2:33).

They left “no *survivors” but as directed did not encroach on the land of the Amorites. (Deut. 2:34-37).*

Mark 11:1-19

So Jesus and the disciples reach Bethany- where they are to celebrate the Passover together. Jesus directs them *“Go to the village ahead of you, and just as you enter it, you will find a colt tied there, which no one has ever ridden. Untie it and bring it here. If anyone asks you, ‘Why are you doing this?’ say, ‘The Lord needs it and will send it back here shortly.’”* (Mark 11:2b-3). So Jesus will shortly enter Jerusalem- for the last time- and here will receive the praise (and cries of desperation) of His people. The people cried out: *“Hosanna!” “Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!” “Blessed is the coming kingdom of our father David!” “Hosanna in the highest heaven!”* (Mark 11:9b-10). “Hosannah” literally means “save”- so the people are both praising Jesus and also pleading with Him to save them. It is a great irony that He was about to “save them” but not in the way they imagined or hoped. “My kingdom is not of this world” Jesus was later to tell his accusers.

The net day Jesus was hungry and saw a fig tree. When He discovered it had no figs, He cursed it “May no one ever eat fruit from you again.” (Mark 11:14). This seems odd to us, since the Scripture tells us “it was not the season for figs” (Mark 11:13). Was Jesus simply frustrated? Was He demonstrating to the disciples that He was able to command the very forces of Nature, but somehow was not able to get what he needed from the “barren” plant?

This mood of foreboding carries over to the next encounter Jesus has- with the moneychangers in the Temple. Jewish law forbid any “graven images” to be brought into the Temple, so the common coins which had the likeness of Caesar on them could not be used. They must be exchanged for coins without a likeness of man or animal- without a “graven image”. There was a considerable profit gained by these moneychangers- and this outrages Jesus, who *“overturned the tables of the money changers and the benches of those selling doves, and would not allow anyone to carry merchandise through the temple courts.”* (Mark 11;15b-16). Jesus said: *“Is it not written: ‘My house will be called a house of prayer for all nations’[c]? But you have made it ‘a den of robbers.’”* (Mark 11:17b). Jesus was quoting Jeremiah 7:11. In this part of Jeremiah, God is challenging the people’s idolatry- they at one time worshipped foreign gods and idols and then went to the Temple – thinking their attendance at God’s Temple would make their idolatry “acceptable”. God certainly did not agree with this mistaken and sinful practice- any more than he did with the practices of the moneychangers.

This was still another instance where those in authority heard Jesus, and decided that He must be eliminated from their midst *“The chief priests and the teachers of*

the law heard this and began looking for a way to kill him, for they feared him, because the whole crowd was amazed at his teaching." (Mark 11:18) They "feared Him", and were jealous and anxious about His presence among them. Every day that passed was another day of Jesus' gaining influence and popular following. Jesus and His disciples then left the city at evening (Mark 11:19).

Deuteronomy 3-4 March 7, 2014 Mark 11:20-33

Opposition…the people of God met with and defeated a significant number of their enemies. In this case the king Og of Bashan met the Hebrew people- and their army- at EDrie. And God told Moses: "Do not be afraid of him, for I have delivered him into your hands, along with his whole army and his land. Do to him what you did to Sihon king of the Amorites, who reigned in Heshbon." (Deut. 3:2) And they did- they defeated Og and his army and took all 60 of the fortified cities. Og was apparently a large man, his bed was measured to be "nine cubits long and four cubits wide." (Deut. 3:11). If we take the "average" cubit to be about 18 inches, then this translates to 13.5 feet long and 6 feet wide.

Then the conquered land was divided among some of the tribes.To the Reubenites and Gadites was given: "the territory north of Aroer by the Arnon Gorge, including half the hill country of Gilead, together with its towns." (Deut. 3:12). To the half tribe of Manessah: "the rest of Gilead and also all of Bashan, the kingdom of Og." (Deut. 3:13). The men able to fight were to lead the way in the rest of the conquest and the women and children were to be left behind: *"The Lord your God has given you this land to take possession of it. But all your able-bodied men, armed for battle, must cross over ahead of the other Israelites. However, your wives, your children and your livestock (I know you have much livestock) may stay in the towns I have given you, until the Lord gives rest to your fellow Israelites as he has to you, and they too have taken over the land that the Lord your God is giving them across the Jordan."*(Deut. 3:18b-20).

Moses then begged God to let him enter the Land, but God "was angry with me and "would not listen to me" (Deut. 3:26). But then God told Moses *Go up to the top of Pisgah and look west and north and south and east. Look at the land with your own eyes, since you are not going to cross this Jordan. But commission Joshua, and encourage and strengthen him, for he will lead this people across and will cause them to inherit the land that you will see."* (Deut. 3:27b-28). So God in His mercy allowed Moses to see the Land, but ordered him not to enter himself but instead to commission Joshua who would be the new leader. All this because of what we may see as a small act of disobedience- striking the rock rather than "speaking to the rock"- but to God it mattered! (Number 20:8).

The God issues what is a foundational statement to His people- similar to Deuteronomy 6 (the Shema): *"Now, Israel, hear the decrees and laws I am about to teach you. Follow them so that you may live and may go in and take possession of the land the Lord, the God of your ancestors, is giving you. Do not add to what I command you and do not subtract from it, but keep the commands of the Lord your God that I give you."* (Deut. 4:1-2) One of the many reasons God gave these decrees was to establish His honor and standing among the nations. If God' people were truly to be a light to the nations" (Isaiah 49:6) then they must command respect for their integrity and righteous living. God makes this clear when He syas that if His people will observe these decrees "carefully" then the nations of the world will say: *"Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people."* (Deut. 4:6). And God's people will be a reflection of Him! In verse 9 we see the recurring

theme “do not forget”. Moses reminds the people of the Ten Commandments and the covenant God Himself has established.
As a reflection of the singular place God has among His people. He orders them: *“do not become corrupt and make for yourselves an idol, an image of any shape, whether formed like a man or a woman, or like any animal on earth or any bird that flies in the air, or like any creature that moves along the ground or any fish in the waters below.”* (Deut. 4:16b-18) The reason that Moses offers to the people: *“For the Lord your God is a consuming fire, a jealous God.”* (Deut. 4:24). Most modern readers are puzzled or even repulsed by this image, but it is a true reflection of God’s nature nonetheless. It is God’s desire that we serve Him only, and His “jealousy” is aimed toward the myriad of other “gods” that rob us of the blessings that come from worship of the “true God”. He really lovers us- enough to keep us out of harm’s way! Moses point out a complementary truth soon after this pronouncement that is paradoxically equally true: *“For the Lord your God is a merciful God; he will not abandon or destroy you or forget the covenant with your ancestors, which he confirmed to them by oath.”* Both are true!
Moses then goes on to give examples of God’s power and presence, all of which were given so that there would be no doubt who God was- His credentials, attributes and characteristics that He chose to reveal to His people. The crowning statement in this discourse is: *“You were shown these things so that you might know that the Lord is God; besides him there is no other.”* (Deut. 4:35). It is not enough to “know” these things. To give assent to them, they must be part of the believer’s heart. And when this happens, great blessings occur*. “Acknowledge and take to heart this day that the Lord is God in heaven above and on the earth below. There is no other. Keep his decrees and commands, which I am giving you today, so that it may go well with you and your children after you and that you may live long in the land the Lord your God gives you for all time.”* (Deut. 4:39-40). When we trust, believe and obey God with all our heart, then it will truly “go well” with us.
Moses then names three cities of refuge. As we saw earlier in Numbers, these cities of refuge increased in number later as the land was apportioned. (Num. 35:11-35).
Deuteronomy 4 concludes with this capstone statement (and a follow up with more specific detail); “*This is the law Moses set before the Israelites. These are the stipulations, decrees and laws Moses gave them when they came out of Egypt and were in the valley near Beth Peor east of the Jordan, in the land of Sihon king of the Amorites, who reigned in Heshbon and was defeated by Moses and the Israelites as they came out of Egypt.”* (Deut 4:44b-46).
Mark 11:20-33
Remember the fig tree that was cursed by Jesus? The disciples and Jesus see it again and this time it is “withered from the roots” (Mark 11:20). Jesus, sensing that they were “impressed” by His power over nature, explains to them the great power of one who has true faith: *“Truly I tell you, if anyone says to this mountain, ‘Go, throw yourself into the sea,’ and does not doubt in their heart but believes that what they say will happen, it will be done for them. Therefore I tell you, whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours. And when you stand praying, if you hold anything against anyone, forgive them, so that your Father in heaven may forgive you your sins.”* (Mark 11:23-25) There are two parts to this teaching, both worthy of consideration: 1) The power of faith is (seemingly) limitless- but it is not a “magic potion” that makes us into superheroes with “super powers”. True faith leads us to God- and God is the source of all the power Jesus is describing here. 2) The necessity of forgiveness. As Jesus teaches

elsewhere (Matthew 6:9-13 and many others), our forgiveness is only possible if we are forgiving. If we are not forgiving, then the channels of grace that God uses to forgive us are closed- not by God but by ourselves!

The Jesus' very authority was questioned- by none other than those who were most threatened by it. The "teachers of the law" who believed that only they had authority, demanded of Jesus: *""By what authority are you doing these things?" they asked. "And who gave you authority to do this?"* (Mark 11:28). Jesus, who knew them better than they knew themselves, answered this question with another question *"I will ask you one question. Answer me, and I will tell you by what authority I am doing these things. John's baptism—was it from heaven, or of human origin? Tell me!"* (Mark 11:29b-30). The teachers knew they could not say "from heaven" because they would then be asked why they did not follow John's challenge and repent. If they said "from human origin" then they risked alienating the people, who (mostly) believed John was sent by God- so they said "We don't know" which really means- you caught us, and we won't say! Jesus' answer is the perfect response: *"Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things."* (Mark 11:33). Did Jesus really feel like He had settled this dispute once and for all? Did He believe that this was the end of the challenges to His authority, or that somehow these "teachers" would cease from being threatened and cease their plots against Him? Probably not! But Jesus told the truth, and His telling of the truth was both liberating – to those who truly loved (and love) Him, and a great threat to those who opposed (and oppose) Him. This is the path that the Lord walked, and the path that we must walk as well.

Deuteronomy 5-7 March 8, 2014 Mark 12:1-27

The very words and commands of God- given to Moses! These commandments were the bedrock of Jewish law and of most of the Judeo-Christian ethics from the time they were given until today. There have been many descriptions and theological treatises on the Commandments (see especially http://www.tomorrowsworld.org/booklets/the-ten-commandments?gclid=CNzir4_J9rwCFTIV7Aodb1EA4A), some have even written books on a single

commandment. I certainly will not add to the scholarship that has been already done, but will simply add my personal observations and experiences:

1- No other gods before me This commandment could have stood alone. If we truly set God first, He will guide our steps (Prov. 16:9; Psalm 119:133), be a lamp for our feet (Psalm 119:105), and provide us with meditations day and night (Josh 1:8).
2- No “graven” images- A follow up to the first- we should never put things – visible or invisible- in the way of our truly seeing God in His glory and majesty.
3- Misuse of God’s Name- The Name of God is part of His power and majesty- The Name for God was so sacred that different pens were used exclusively for the Name. and the Name was not uttered other than in acts of reverence and worship. His name is a reflection of His personality, attributes, and character.
4- Observe the Sabbath (keep it holy) Probably the most misused (apart from bearing false witness) of the commandments in this “modern” time. We as a culture act as if Sunday (or Saturday if that is the Sabbath of our tradition) is “just another day”.
5- Honor your father and mother (or your “acting parents”- so many children are raised by grandparent, aunts, etc. because of issues with the biological parents)- and God rewards this with a promise that you will “live long” and that “it may go well with you” (Deut. 5:16). This is a very painful one for me since my daughter and stepson are both estranged from us. We pray every day for reconciliation!
6- No murder. Our laws carefully distinguish between “murder” and “manslaughter” and assign “degrees” of murder. At one point in Jewish history, “murder” only applied to the deliberate killing of one’s own people. Other people- non-Jews- were not thought of as equal and therefore their “murder” was not looked on the same.
7- Do not commit adultery. The adulterous relationship may only be emotional, but it is just as damaging. The integrity of marriage is the bedrock of civilization.
8- Bo not steal- either physical things, or ideas or “intellectual property”.
9- No false testimony- this even applies to “white lies”- the truth, though difficult, is the standard.
10- Do not covet- anything! House, land, position, looks, income, status, fame or fortune- spend the time and energy your coveting takes and build your own life- the life God has planned for you!

As if these commandments needed any more emphasis, Moses tells his people: “*These are the commandments the Lord proclaimed in a loud voice to your whole assembly there on the mountain from out of the fire, the cloud and the deep darkness; and he added nothing more. Then he wrote them on two stone tablets and gave them to me.”* (Deut. 5:22). Then God gives them both a command and a promise: “*So be careful to do what the Lord your God has commanded you; do not turn aside to the right or to the left. Walk in obedience to all that the Lord your God has commanded you, so that you may live and prosper and prolong your days in the land that you will possess.”* (Deut. 5:32b-33). The promise also includes God’s statement to Moses: “*Oh, that their hearts would be inclined to fear me and keep all my commands always, so that it might go well with them and their children forever! “* (Deut. 5:29). So when we “fear” God (honor and reverence Him) and keep His

commandments- we will lead lives that are filled with the “joy of the Lord” (Psalm 5:11).

The central command is then given. God wants His people to not only “inhabit” the Land, but to “increase greatly” and that “things will go well with you” and that you may “enjoy a long life” (Deut. 6:1-4). Then comes the Shema (Hear O Israel) in Deuteronomy 6:5- perhaps one of the first verses memories by a Hebrew child, and the verse that was quoted by Jesus as the “greatest commandment” (Matthew 22:36-40; Mark 12:28-31; Luke 10:25-28) “*Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength. These commandments that I give you today are to be on your hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates.”* (Deut. 6:4-9) Jesus added Leviticus 19:18 (love your neighbor as yourself) to the Shema and said that everything- *”All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments”* (Matthew 22:40). In truth, the entire ethical and moral structure of the Scripture is centered on these two commands. How easy they are to understand- how difficult, except with the power of the Spirit- to consistently follow!

The nations in the Land God was giving to His people, the *”Hittites, Girgashites, Amorites, Canaanites, Perizzites, Hivites and Jebusites”* (Deut. 7:1) were to be driven out of the land. Furthermore, there was to be no intermarrying with these pagan people- so that their culture and false religion would not corrupt and distract from the worship of the One True God! The temptation to intermarry and adopt the culture and religious practices was so strong that God ordered them to *“destroy them totally. Make no treaty with them, and show them no mercy. Do not intermarry with them. Do not give your daughters to their sons or take their daughters for your sons, for they will turn your children away from following me to serve other gods, and the Lord’s anger will burn against you and will quickly destroy you. This is what you are to do to them: Break down their altars, smash their sacred*

stones, cut down their Asherah poles[e] and burn their idols in the fire." (Deut. 7:2b-5)

Why? Why this complete destruction? One of the reasons is given in this chapter *"The Lord your God has chosen you out of all the peoples on the face of the earth to be his people, his treasured possession."* (Deut. 7:6). We see later how subtle and insidious the effects of intermarriage are in the story of Solomon, who took "foreign wives" out of political considerations. What father/king would war on Israel if his daughter was the wife of the king? But this was part of the reason of Solomon's downfall! (1 Kings 11:2). The Denison Report sheds some light on the practice of eliminating entire families in this process ".. the blood retribution practiced by ancient tribal culture required the Jewish armies to destroy not only the soldiers of their enemies, but their families as well. So long as one member of a family remained, that person was bound by cultural law to attempt retribution against the enemies of his people. Such unrest and hostility would have persisted throughout the nation's history, with no possibility of peace in the land. What appears to be genocide was actually the way wars were typically prosecuted." (http://www.denisonforum.org/faith-questions/21-bible/51-why-did-god-tell-the-jews-to-kill-the-canaanites)

The people naturally wondered how this conquest was to take place since *"These nations are stronger than we are."* (Deut. 7:17). The people were told: "*Do not be terrified by them, for the Lord your God, who is among you, is a great and awesome God. The Lord your God will drive out those nations before you, little by little. You will not be allowed to eliminate them all at once, or the wild animals will multiply around you. But the Lord your God will deliver them over to you, throwing them into great confusion until they are destroyed. He will give their kings into your hand, and you will wipe out their names from under heaven. No one will be able to stand up against you; you will destroy them. The images of their gods you are to burn in the fire. Do not covet the silver and gold on them, and do not take it for yourselves, or you will be ensnared by it, for it is detestable to the Lord your God."* (Deut. 7:21b-25) Notice the warning against "coveting" the valuables- silver and gold- that were captured in this process. This is described as "detestable" to God since it was part of the pagan religion and religious practice of the conquered peoples- these were part of the "images of their gods".

Mark 12:1-27

Jesus tells His followers the "parable of the tenants". The description of the vineyard is typical of those found in the region at this time and the hiring of tenants *"He put a wall around it, dug a pit for the winepress and built a watchtower. Then he rented the vineyard to some farmers and moved to another place."* (Mark 12:1). Then the time comes for the owner to collect some of the "fruit of the vineyard" (Mark 12:2). The tenants not only disrespect the servant sent by the Master, but "they seized him, beat him and sent him away empty-handed." (Mark 12:3). This happened to several succeeding servants, some of which were killed by the tenants. Then the Master/Owner decides to send his son, since he thought "'They will respect my son.'" (Mark 12:6). Note that this is the Owner's son "whom he loved". But the wicked tenants said *"'This is the heir. Come, let's kill him, and the inheritance will be ours.' So they took him and killed him, and threw him out of the vineyard."* (Mark 12:7b-8). Jesus then asks (and answers) the question: *"What then will the owner of the vineyard do? He will come and kill those tenants and give the vineyard to others. Haven't you read this passage of Scripture: "'The stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; the Lord has done this, and it is marvelous in our*

eyes'" (Mark 9b-11). The meaning of this parable was clear, both to those who heard it and loved Jesus, as well as to those who heard it and despised, plotted against, and wished to eliminate Jesus *"the chief priests, the teachers of the law and the elders"* (Mark 12:12). The owner (God the Father) had sent His Son (whom He loved!), hoping to accomplish "the harvest" and the tenants jealously and selfishly killed the Son so that the "inheritance" would be theirs alone. The "stumbling block"- the Messiah Himself, became the very cornerstone of God's Kingdom- and this is "marvelous in our eyes"! And the evil and rebellious hearts of these "teachers and priests" led them to plot murder against God's very Son, who had the courage to tell the truth about them and their dark motives. The Scripture notes that they were "afraid of the crowd"- which ultimately led to Jesus' arrest "away from the crowds" at night and "secretly". (Matthew 26:4; 31; Luke 22:6) Their fear- and a justified one- was that the people would riot and cause even more problems than the "teachers and priests" already had to deal with.

Then the question of authority and taxes is thrust upon Jesus. We must bear in minds that the questioners "the Pharisees and Herodians" (Mark 12:13) were not really interested in an answer- they were trying to "trap Jesus" (Mark 12:15). Taxes were about as popular then as now, and taxes given to the hated Roman conquerors was even more repellent! Jesus quickly clarifies the situation with His truth: *"Bring me a denarius and let me look at it." They brought the coin, and he asked them, "Whose image is this? And whose inscription?" "Caesar's," they replied. Then Jesus said to them, "Give back to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's."* (Mark 12:15b-17). And the Scripture records that they were "amazed at Him" (Mark 12:17). Were they "amazed" because He was too wise and intelligent to be caught in their trap? Were they surprised that the answer was so simple and obvious- and that it had the "ring of truth"- or were they really disappointed because an opportunity to discredit Jesus or cause Him trouble had been lost?

Marriage at the Resurrection? The Sadducees posed this question to Jesus. It was ironic that they did so, because traditionally the Sadducees did not believe in the resurrection (so they were "sad, you see!"). The complicated situation they present to Jesus, which involved a succession of brothers marrying the same woman after the previous brother/husband dies, was not asked because they wanted an answer. My belief is that this was a deliberate and elaborate "trap question". After all, how could this "untrained" teacher possible have the wisdom to give a good (or any) answer to this "difficult" question? Jesus answers this question by showing clearly how different His understanding is than that of these questioners. Jesus knew the truth- and they were only "guessing at the truth". Jesus tells them that they are in error *"Are you not in error because you do not know the Scriptures or the power of God? When the dead rise, they will neither marry nor be given in marriage; they will be like the angels in heaven."* (Mark 12:24b-25). Jesus goes on further to confront their disbelief in the resurrection of the dead by asking "*have you not read in the Book of Moses, in the account of the burning bush, how God said to him, 'I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob'? He is not the God of the dead, but of the living. You are badly mistaken!"* (Mark 12:26b-27). God is truly the God of the living, and He is therefore the God of the Patriarchs, who are alive!

Deuteronomy 8-10 March 9, 2014 Mark 12:28-44

Remembering…so important…so that we know where we came from and how not to repeat the mistakes, errors, and sins of the past. Moses is trying to get his people to remember that journey they have just traveled. One of the key points Moses wants to impress on these his people is this: *"He humbled you, causing you to hunger and then feeding you with manna, which neither you nor your ancestors had known, to teach you that man does not live on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord."* (Deut. 8:3). There is a constant dynamic in God's people in the Hebrew Scriptures- that of obedience and worship of the Lord and "right living", and then of abandonment of the Lord, wickedness and disobedience. When God sees His people rejecting both Himself and His covenant He sends prophets and teachers to bring them back- sometimes with success and many times with rejection- not only of the message but the prophet themselves!

God clearly shows His graciousness when he brings the (finally) to the Land he has promised, *"a good land—a land with brooks, streams, and deep springs gushing out into the valleys and hills; a land with wheat and barley, vines and fig trees, pomegranates, olive oil and honey; a land where bread will not be scarce and you will lack nothing; a land where the rocks are iron and you can dig copper out of the hills."* (Deut. 8:7b-9). Did God's people "deserve" such a land- the answer is clearly "no". But they, like we, are given so often the grace and mercy of God instead of the judgment we deserve. Another important point is made- we are to "praise the Lord" (Deut. 8:10) when we enjoy the bountiful blessings he has sent us. We are to remember God's blessings, and *"Be careful that you do not forget the Lord your God, failing to observe his commands, his laws and his decrees that I am giving you this day."* (Deut 8:11). Otherwise our *"heart will become proud and you will forget the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery."* (Deut 8:14).

God makes a strong point- through Moses as spokesman- that the people are not to believe that God is giving them this Land because of their righteous living, but they must *"Understand, then, that it is not because of your righteousness that the Lord your God is giving you this good land to possess, for you are a stiff-necked people."* (Deut 9:6)

The Moses reminds them of the debacle in the desert- their making and worship of the golden calf- all while Moses was away with God receiving the Law! He then told *them "When I looked, I saw that you had sinned against the Lord your God; you had made for yourselves an idol cast in the shape of a calf. You had turned aside quickly*

from the way that the Lord had commanded you. So I took the two tablets and threw them out of my hands, breaking them to pieces before your eyes." (Deut. 9:16-17). How quickly they had turned away from God- and Aaron had condoned this behavior- and excused himself to Moses by blaming the people! Perhaps the only thing that saved Aaron from God's wrath was that Moses *"prayed for Aaron too"* (Deut. 9:20). The people angered God also at Kadesh Barnea, and once again Moses pled for the very lives of his people *"I lay prostrate before the Lord those forty days and forty nights because the Lord had said he would destroy you. 26 I prayed to the Lord and said, "Sovereign Lord, do not destroy your people, your own inheritance that you redeemed by your great power and brought out of Egypt with a mighty hand."* (Deut. 9:25-26) And once again, God graciously relents from judgment and gives His great mercy!

The original tablets had been destroyed in the rage Moses felt for the outrageous behavior of the people- so replacements were needed. God told Moses to *"Chisel out two stone tablets like the first ones and come up to me on the mountain. Also make a wooden ark.2 I will write on the tablets the words that were on the first tablets, which you broke. Then you are to put them in the ark."* (Deut. 10:1-2). Moses did as God said, and God wrote on the tablets "what He had written before" (Deut. 10:4) and the new tablets were put in the acacia wood ark to take their place in the Tent of Meeting. Aaron subsequently dies, is replaced by his son Eleazar, and God tells Moses to 'lead the people on their way" to the Land of Promise (Deut. 10:11).

What does God require of us? This same question was asked and answered by God's prophet Micah years later (Micah 6:8). The answer given to Moses is *"fear the Lord your God, to walk in obedience to him, to love him, to serve the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, 13 and to observe the Lord's commands and decrees that I am giving you today for your own good.."* (Deut 10:12b-13) Moses then tell the people "God owns everything- it is all His possession" (my paraphrase of Deut. 10:14). Yet God loved- and loves- His people and He "chose you, their descendants, above all the nations" (Deut. 10:15). The grand sweep of God's activities on behalf of His people is given in these words: "*He is the one you praise; he is your God, who performed for you those great and awesome wonders you saw with your own eyes. Your ancestors who went down into Egypt were seventy in all, and now the Lord your God has made you as numerous as the stars in the sky."* (Deut. 10:21-22). His Name be ever praised!

Mark 12:28-44

Another teacher, hearing that Jesus gave a "good answer" to the Sadducees' question, had a question of his own. He asked *"Of all the commandments, which is the most important?"* (Mark 12:28). By this time in history, the original "simple" laws of God had been codified, expanded upon, interpreted, re-interpreted and had attached to them an extensive commentary. How could anyone find a single "greatest" commandment? Yet Jesus was equal (actually superior!) to the task. *"The most important one," answered Jesus, "is this: 'Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.' The second is this: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no commandment greater than these."* (Mark 12:29-31). Notice that Jesus gives two answers, quoted from Deuteronomy 6 and Leviticus 19. It has always been a delight to me to see how "internalized" the Scriptures were to Jesus. He had clearly studied these Scriptures as a boy and a young man, but had knowledge and insight into all of them that (to me) attests to

His intimacy with them and the God (His Father) who inspired them. What a wonderful thing it is to have God's Word "hidden in our hearts" (Psalm 119:11). Jesus noted the sincerity of the one asking this question, and commented *"You are not far from the kingdom of God."* (Mark 12:34). Jesus found faith (and knowledge) in several "unexpected" places…here in the "teacher of the law" and also in the Centurion (Matthew 8:10; Luke 7:9) whose servant was ill. This questioner had truly understood one of the core principles of the Kingdom.

Then Jesus Himself poses a question *"Why do the teachers of the law say that the Messiah is the son of David? David himself, speaking by the Holy Spirit, declared: "'The Lord said to my Lord: "Sit at my right hand until I put your enemies under your feet."' David himself calls him 'Lord.' How then can he be his son?"* (Mark 12:35b-37) The paradox- which Jesus clearly understood- was that David's "son" by earthly descent (Jesus) was also equally –and at the same time- his Lord! I imagine the "people" were delighted at this "rabbi" Jesus who could literally pose an unanswered (and to the teachers- unanswerable) question!

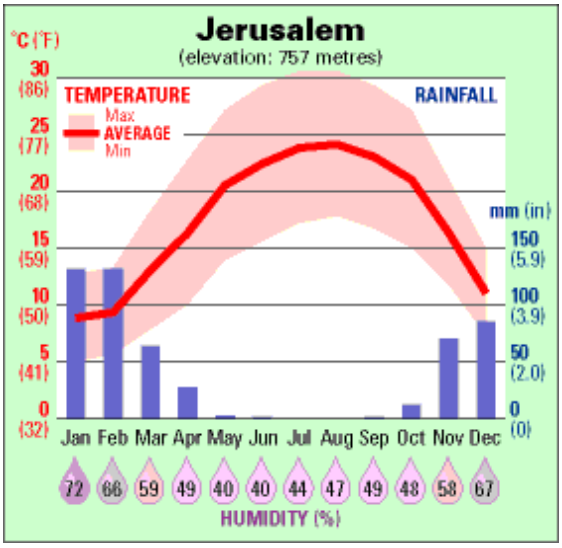
The Jesus warns His followers about the "teachers of the law"- as they are described here: *"They like to walk around in flowing robes and be greeted with respect in the marketplaces, and have the most important seats in the synagogues and the places of honor at banquets. They devour widows' houses and for a show make lengthy prayers."* (Mark 12:38b-40). Jesus comments that "they will be punished severely" (Mark 12:40). We must be careful of painting "all" the teachers of the law with such a broad brush. Certainly many of them fit this description well. Some however, including the one Jesus just has spoken to, were not "far from the Kingdom"! Jesus judges each person as an individual, and not as a member of a group- and we should do the same. We are, however, not to be "judges" (that role is up to God)- we are, to paraphrase "fruit inspectors" (Matthew 7:16).

Matthew 12:41-43 is often used as a subject text for sermons on "sacrificial giving". I know Dave Ramsey has gone on record saying he wishes these sermons would not be preached, at least if the object lesson of the sermon is to "give everything away" and trust God for everything material. We must be careful in our understanding and criticism here (as always in the Scripture). We do not "stand above" the Scripture as the theologians in "Higher Criticism" do! Many of us hold a very "high" view of Scripture- as I do. Those of us in this "camp" look at Scripture as our judge, and not ourselves a "judges" of Scripture. Jesus clearly admired this woman's sacrifice, as He did when a woman (identified by John as "Mary") anointed Jesus with precious and costly perfume (Mark 14:3-9; Matthew 26:6-13; Luke 7:36-50; John 12:1-8). Sacrifice, when accompanied by a heart full of joy and surrender to God, is a model that we can (and should) embrace fully. Jesus describes her sacrifice this way: *"They all gave out of their wealth; but she, out of her poverty, put in everything—all she had to live on."* (Mark 12:44). She literally "threw herself on the mercy of God".

Deuteronomy 11-13 March 10, 2014 Mark 13:1-13

Logic is full of "if-then" statements. If "A" is true, then "B" is the conclusion. God's loving covenant with His people is much like that- as we see in this passage: "*So if you faithfully obey the commands I am giving you today—to love the Lord your God and to serve him with all your heart and with all your soul— then I will send rain on your land in its season, both autumn and spring rains, so that you may gather in your grain, new wine and olive oil. I will provide grass in the fields for your cattle, and you will eat and be satisfied."* (Deut. 11:13-15). God is the promise Maker and the promise Keeper- He cannot do anything but keep His promises and covenants because of His righteousness- we are the ones who break, ignore, or otherwise do not keep our part of the covenant! God promises that this Promised Land will be unlike any lands His people have known "*The land you are entering to take over is not like the land of Egypt, from which you have come, where you planted your seed and irrigated it by foot as in a vegetable garden. But the land you are crossing the Jordan to take possession of is a land of mountains and valleys that drinks rain from heaven. It is a land the Lord your God cares for; the eyes of the Lord your God are continually on it from the beginning of the year to its end."* (Deut. 11:10-12) This land- the modern day Israel- is indeed a land of plenty. The ingenuity of Israeli scientists has led to one of the most modern water production and conservation capacities in the world. According to Wikipedia: "The ongoing shortage of water in the country has spurred innovation in water conservation techniques, and a substantial agricultural modernization, drip irrigation, was invented in Israel. Israel is also at the technological forefront of desalination and water recycling. The Ashkelon seawater reverse osmosis (SWRO) plant, the largest in the world, was voted 'Desalination Plant of the Year' in the Global Water Awards in 2006. Israel hosts an annual Water Technology Exhibition and Conference (WaTec) that attracts thousands of people from across the world. By the end of 2013, 85 percent of the country's water consumption will be from reverse osmosis. As a result of innovations

in reverse osmosis technology, Israel is set to become a net exporter of water in the coming years." (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Israel). The land is extraordinarily productive, needing a water supplemental system since rain is scarce from May to September. In modern times, Israel produces a vast majority of its own food needs "While agricultural workers make up only 3.7% of the work force, Israel produces 95% of its own food requirements, supplementing this with imports of grain, oilseeds, meat, coffee, cocoa and sugar" (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Agriculture_in_Israel).



God gave His people a clear warning, and a promise: "*Be careful, or you will be enticed to turn away and worship other gods and bow down to them. Then the Lord's anger will burn against you, and he will shut up the heavens so that it will not rain and the ground will yield no produce, and you will soon perish from the good land the Lord is giving you. Fix these words of mine in your hearts and minds; tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. Teach them to your children, talking about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates, so that your days and the days of your children may be many in the land the Lord swore to give your ancestors, as many as the days that the heavens are above the earth."* (Deut. 11:16-21). Note that God's warning about "rain" would be particularly noted and feared since for the summer season there is typically much less rain. God, however, is interested in His people being immersed in His Law, such that "these words of Mine" become an integral part of the people's lives.

God promises that He will "drive out all these nations before you" (Deut. 11:23). God summarizes these pronouncements by giving His people the option- be blessed or be cursed, all dependent on their response *"See, I am setting before you today a blessing and a curse— the blessing if you obey the commands of the Lord your God that I am giving you today; the curse if you disobey the commands of the Lord your God and turn from the way that I command you today by following other gods, which you have not known."* (Deut. 11:26-28). The choice was clearly theirs (and ours!).

God had already declared that He was a "jealous God' (Exodus 20:4-5) and in His first commandment gave His people orders to "have no other gods before Me" (Exodus 20:3). God specifies what His people are to do with the "gods" of the

people they drive out of the land: *"Destroy completely all the places on the high mountains, on the hills and under every spreading tree, where the nations you are dispossessing worship their gods. Break down their altars, smash their sacred stones and burn their Asherah poles in the fire; cut down the idols of their gods and wipe out their names from those places."* (Deut. 12:2-3) God did not, would not, and will not tolerate "other gods". One of the main reasons for this is the moral superiority of God's laws as opposed to the rules and practices of the "other gods", which allowed for sexual promiscuity (even in worship) , child sacrifice, divination, and other practices that are at their root Satanic! If God's people allowed those practicing these "detestable things" to continue, then they would be a constant temptation and a trap to true godly living and worship.

God gives further instructions: *"You must not worship the Lord your God in their way. But you are to seek the place the Lord your God will choose from among all your tribes to put his Name there for his dwelling. To that place you must go; there bring your burnt offerings and sacrifices, your tithes and special gifts, what you have vowed to give and your freewill offerings, and the firstborn of your herds and flocks. There, in the presence of the Lord your God, you and your families shall eat and shall rejoice in everything you have put your hand to, because the Lord your God has blessed you."* (Deut. 12:4b-7). Notice God is specific in His direction to the people about not worshipping "their way"! God also wants His Name to be in a specific place designated for sacrifice and worship and "rejoicing" in His blessings.

God warns His people again about their behavior after "driving out" those pagan inhabitants from the Land: "*when you have driven them out and settled in their land, and after they have been destroyed before you, be careful not to be ensnared by inquiring about their gods, saying, "How do these nations serve their gods? We will do the same." You must not worship the Lord your God in their way, because in worshiping their gods, they do all kinds of detestable things the Lord hates. They even burn their sons and daughters in the fire as sacrifices to their gods."* (Deut, 12:29b-31) God's people are not to "do the same" as the detestable practices of those they are driving out of the land!

God used a number of persons whom he filled with the Spirit so that they could fulfill their prophetic calling and declare "thus says the Lord" (Jer. 9:23 and many others). The person claiming the office and calling of a prophet of God must tell the truth as God reveals it to them- the penalty for false prophesy is death *"That prophet or dreamer must be put to death for inciting rebellion against the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt and redeemed you from the land of slavery. That prophet or dreamer tried to turn you from the way the Lord your God commanded you to follow. You must purge the evil from among you."* (Deut. 13:5)

If there is a rumor of someone in a "town" where "troublemakers" are calling for the people to worship other "gods", then this must be investigated and if found true, then all persons in that town must be destroyed: *"If you hear it said about one of the towns the Lord your God is giving you to live in that troublemakers have arisen among you and have led the people of their town astray, saying, "Let us go and worship other gods" (gods you have not known), then you must inquire, probe and investigate it thoroughly. And if it is true and it has been proved that this detestable thing has been done among you, you must certainly put to the sword all who live in that town. You must destroy it completely, both its people and its livestock."* (Deut. 13:12-15) Clearly this is a matter that God takes extremely seriously. As we see later in Scripture- "the wages of sin is death" (Rom. 6:23).

Thank God that He took it on Himself to send His very Son to bear this penalty for us!

Mark 13:1-13

Look at these great (large) stones! How wonderful the Temple structure was. The enormous stones that were part of its construction were carefully prepared and "dressed" to fit perfectly together and become part of this magnificent edifice. Jesus told His disciples: "Not one stone here will be left on another; every one will be thrown down." (Mark 13:2b). This prophesy was indeed fulfilled when the Romans overthrew the Maccabean rebellion and desecrated and partly destroyed the Temple in 70 AD. Naturally the disciples wanted to know the "where and when" of these events. They asked Jesus *"Tell us, when will these things happen? And what will be the sign that they are all about to be fulfilled?"* (Mark 13:4).

Jesus goes on to try to explain to them what is coming: *"Watch out that no one deceives you. Many will come in my name, claiming, 'I am he,' and will deceive many. When you hear of wars and rumors of wars, do not be alarmed. Such things must happen, but the end is still to come. Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. There will be earthquakes in various places, and famines. These are the beginning of birth pains. "You must be on your guard. You will be handed over to the local councils and flogged in the synagogues. On account of me you will stand before governors and kings as witnesses to them. And the gospel must first be preached to all nations. Whenever you are arrested and brought to trial, do not worry beforehand about what to say. Just say whatever is given you at the time, for it is not you speaking, but the Holy Spirit. "Brother will betray brother to death, and a father his child. Children will rebel against their parents and have them put to death. Everyone will hate you because of me, but the one who stands firm to the end will be saved."* (Mark 13:5b-13).

Certainly there has been a lot of speculation about the Second Coming! There have been (and probably always will be) people who try to "decode" the Scriptures and come up with the Day. All of these predictions will ultimately fail- for the simple reason that Jesus gives later in this discourse: *"But about that day or hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father."* (Mark 13:32) - We are to "Watch", "be on guard" and "be alert" (Mark 13:33,35). Since we don't know the date of the Day- we must always be "prayed up" and ready for His coming! That is the only practical response, and that is the only response that ultimately honors God and puts us "in our proper place"- It's not really about us, it's about Him and His final triumph over the sin-infested world.

Deuteronomy 14-16 March 11, 2014 Mark 13:14-37

How should we mourn the dead? How should we plan our diets? These don't seem to be "important things", yet they are part of our daily witness. The choices we make, especially those seen or otherwise noticed by others, have consequences for either the building of the Kingdom or the discrediting of God's Kingdom on this earth. God told His people not to "cut themselves" or "shave the front of their heads" to mourn the dead (Deut. 14:1). This distinguished them from the practices in other cultures. The dietary provisions are based on prevention of disease- these dietary restrictions could be followed today with generally health-enhancing results. (Deut. 14:3-21). Cooking a young goat in its mother's milk (Deut. 14:21) may have been an ancient pagan practice, and some scholars believe it is part of the origin of

keeping kosher- where meat and dairy are strictly segregated. (http://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/1149824/jewish/Meat-Milk.htm)

The tithe- the "tenth" was not only given from one's monetary resources, but from the land and its produce as well (Deut. 14:22-27). Every third year , the "tithes of that year's produce" were to be brought into the towns so that the "Levites, foreigners, fatherless and widows" could eat from that which was given. (Deut. 14:28-29).

At the end of seven years, all debts to "fellow Israelites" were cancelled (Deut. 15:1). It was acceptable to "require payment from a foreigner" (Deut. 15:3), a practice which ultimately led to the Jewish banking systems in Europe and elsewhere. The attitude towards the poor is essentially, there should not be any poor among you. This is stated in the passage: *"However, there need be no poor people among you, for in the land the Lord your God is giving you to possess as your inheritance, he will richly bless you..."* (Deut. 15:4). Yet later in the same chapter of Deuteronomy we see this prescription for dealing with the poor*: "If anyone is poor among your fellow Israelites in any of the towns of the land the Lord your God is giving you, do not be hardhearted or tightfisted toward them. Rather, be openhanded and freely lend them whatever they need."* (Deut.15:7b-8). The Scripture also then warns about the *"wicked thought"* that not lending to the poor would be beneficial if the seventh year of debt forgiveness is near. (Deut. 15:8-9). The thinking is most likely along these lines- if we lived in a perfect world where everyone did what God requires, then there would be no poor- since we don't live in such perfection, then we must realistically account for the poor among us. This "work ethic" was a central belief among many people and cultures- including the Puritans and other early settlers of North America.

Servants (slaves?) are to be freed in the seventh year, and are not to be left "empty handed" (Deut. 15:12-15). God's people are to "remember that you were slaves in Egypt" (Deut. 15:15). The firstborn of the flocks are to be sacrificed to the Lord, but only if they are "without defect" (Deut. 15:19-21). The blood of the animal – which represents its life- is to be "poured on the ground" and not eaten (Deut. 15:22). One of the reasons for this is reverence for the sacredness of life (Deut. 12:23).

More detail about the proper observance of the Passover is given (Deut. 16:1-8). No leavened bread is to be used, as a reminder that God's people left Egypt "in haste" (Deut. 16:3). All leaven is to be removed from the household, and no meat that is sacrificed is to be kept past twelve hours (overnight) from the previous evening's preparation (Deut. 16:4). On the seventh day of the celebration an "assembly to the Lord God" is to be held and no work done the entire week. (Deut. 15:8). The Festivals of Weeks and Tabernacles (Booths) are both described (Deut. 15:9-17). It is worthy to note that the prescription is to "rejoice before the Lord your God" (Deut. 15:11) and when celebrating and remembering God's blessings "your joy will be complete" (Deut. 15:15). Surely there is much to celebrate as we remember the many ways God has blessed us.

A description is given of the appointment and function of judges. We will see this practice later, before the time when Israel had a king (Judges). God admonishes His people – and His judges *"Follow justice and justice alone, so that you may live and possess the land the Lord your God is giving you."* (Deut. 15:20) Finally a prohibition against worshipping "other gods" is given- God's people are not to set up a "wooden

Asherah pole" or erect a "sacred stone", for God hates these. (Deut. 15:21-22). This prohibition was unfortunately disobeyed many times!

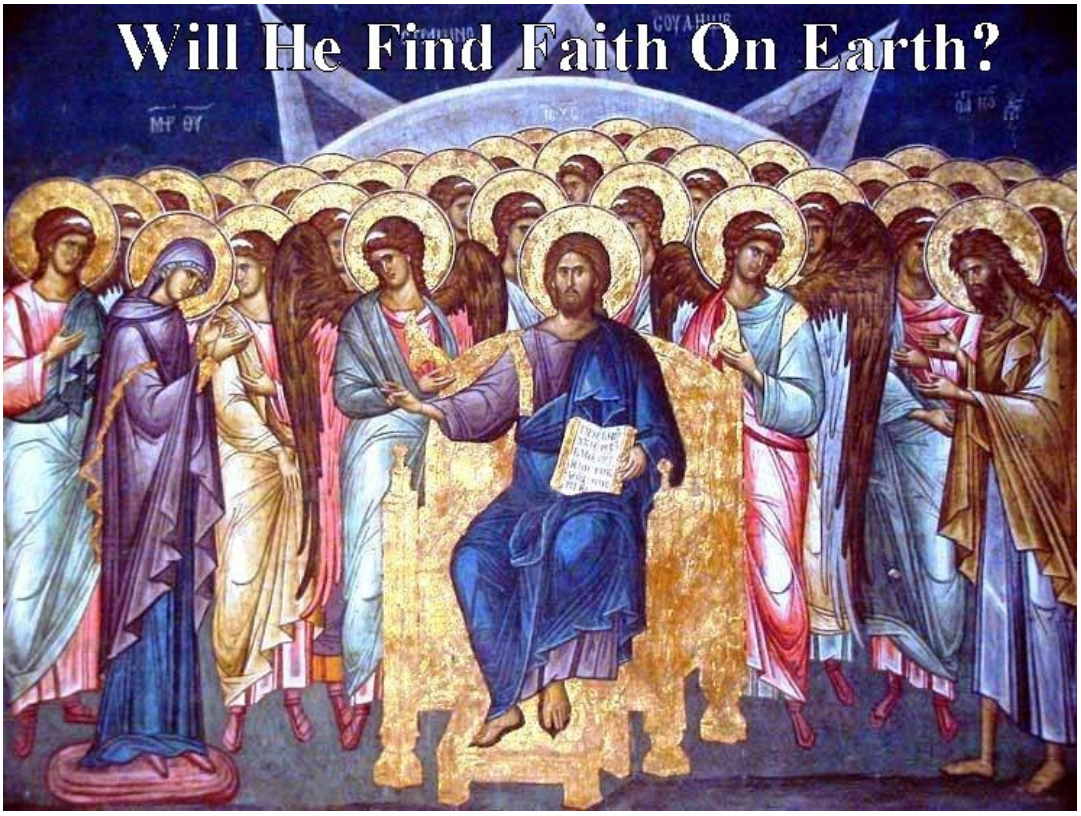
Mark 13:14-37

Mark 13:14-20 and several verses following have been a source of controversy and discussion among Christian believers since they were recorded. What is the "abomination that causes desolation"? Is it a reference to Daniel 9:27; 11:31; 12:11? Some scholars believe this was a reference to the coming destruction by the Roman army, that was to take place by 70 AD. Certainly whatever this abomination is, it would be wise to "flee to the mountains" (Mark 13:14).

False "Messiahs" will come, and will deceive the people greatly (Mark 13:21-23). The sun and moon will darken, similar to the description given in Joel and Revelation (Mark 13:24-25; Joel 2:10; 4:15; Revelation 6:12). Jesus, the Son of Man will be seen "coming in clouds with great power and glory." (Mark 13:26) and he will "gather the elect" from the four winds and the "corners" of the earth. (Mark 13:27)

The signs will be like the signs given by a fig tree: *"As soon as its twigs get tender and its leaves come out, you know that summer is near. Even so, when you see these things happening, you know that it is near, right at the door."* (Mark 13:28b-29) Then comes a statement that has perhaps been the most controversial of all: *"Truly I tell you, this generation will certainly not pass away until all these things have happened."* (Mark 13:30). Assuming Jesus is not in error, and assuming the Scripture is inerrant and reliable, what are we to do with this passage? Surely common sense tells us that we are not living in a time AFTER the events described here! Scholars have long debated the meaning and interpretation of this passage, with answers ranging from a "post millenial" theology that assumes we are indeed living in the age after these events (the belief that the Olivet prophesy- as this section of Mark is described- was fulfilled completely in the first century) to an "amillenial" theology that essentially negates the importance (or even existence) of the Millenium. My present understanding is mirrored most accurately by Gleason Archer who states "sometimes genea ("generation'') was used as a synonym of genos ("race,'' "stock,'' "nation,'' "people''). Archer writes, ... Thus, Jesus' words might be rendered, "This people shall not pass away until all these things are fulfilled.'' In that rendering, He could have been referring to the Jewish people (which is the most likely given the context) or to the Church - for both Israel and the Church are given divine promises that they would remain in existence until the end of time" (Jeremiah 31:35-37; Matthew 16:18).
http://christianity.stackexchange.com/questions/4309/what-does-jesus-mean-with-this-generation-and-all-these-things-in-mark-1330

To me, the "bottom line" of all this is given in Jesus' admonitions in Matthew 13:32-37. First of all, no one but God the father knows when Jesus will return: "But about that day or hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father." (Mark 13:32) "Be on guard", "Be alert" and "Watch" (Mark 13:33,37) are the bywords given in Scripture. Since we don't know the "day or hour" then we should be ready- busy praying, busy doing God's work- busy helping the "least and the lost", busy flowing His leadership. Then, when He returns, He will find faith on the earth? (Luke 18:8)



Deuteronomy 17-19 March 12, 2014 Mark 14:1-25

Only the best! God demands and deserves it- we should give it! As stated in Deuteronomy 17:1 *"Do not sacrifice to the Lord your God an ox or a sheep that has any defect or flaw in it, for that would be detestable to him."*

Purity in devotion- a principle and law so important God put it first in His commandments. If someone is found involved in violation of this *"or worshiped other gods, bowing down to them or to the sun or the moon or the stars in the sky, and this has been brought to your attention, then you must investigate it thoroughly. If it is true and it has been proved that this detestable thing has been done in Israel, take the man or woman who has done this evil deed to your city gate and stone that person to death."* (Deut. 17:3b-5). The practices worth of this punishment must be established on the testimony of "two or three witnesses" (Deut. 17:6). And the "hands of the witnesses" must be the first in putting the offenders to death (Deut. 17:7). This practice is probably understandable in modern times only as the "removal of a spiritual cancer" (http://www.hope-in-jesus.com/Teachings/spiritual_cancer.htm). The erosion of faith in God comes usually not suddenly but gradually- a compromise here, a failure to discipline there, and soon we who are "set apart" look and act just like the world, which Scripture teaches is under the control of Satan himself (1 John 5:19) See also (http://www.cgg.org/index.cfm/fuseaction/Library.sr/CT/CGGBOOKLETS/k/449/Prepare-To-Meet-Your-God-The-Book-of-Amos-Part-One.htm)

Difficulties and conflicts inevitable arise among God's people, and someone must decide what is right and in accordance with God's law, so there was established a system of priests and judges to determine difficult matters. The instructions given

are: "*Go to the Levitical priests and to the judge who is in office at that time. Inquire of them and they will give you the verdict. 10 You must act according to the decisions they give you at the place the Lord will choose. Be careful to do everything they instruct you to do."* (Deut. 17:9-10). The instructions and findings are to be followed, on penalty of death. These outcomes and decisions were regarded as having the same authority as God Himself.

Then the issue of having a king over Israel is dealt with. Elsewhere in Scripture God said (1 Sam. 8:7) "*it is not you they have rejected, but they have rejected me as their king."* God intended to be King of Israel, but the people insisted to Samuel that they be given a king "as all the other nations have" (1 Sam 8:5). Here God acknowledges the desire of His people, and gives what (to me) amounts to His permissive will (I will allow this as "Plan B") for the people to have a king. The instructions and requirements of this king are: "*be sure to appoint over you a king the Lord your God chooses. He must be from among your fellow Israelites. Do not place a foreigner over you, one who is not an Israelite. The king, moreover, must not acquire great numbers of horses for himself or make the people return to Egypt to get more of them, for the Lord has told you, "You are not to go back that way again." He must not take many wives, or his heart will be led astray. He must not accumulate large amounts of silver and gold."* (Deut. 17:15b-17) Ironically, some of these were the very things that Solomon did during his reign- Solomon's reign was the zenith of Israel's power and influence, but descended into division and internal strife after his kingship was over. The king was to be righteous, and study the law and follow its commands and precepts: "*he is to read it all the days of his life so that he may learn to revere the Lord his God and follow carefully all the words of this law and these decrees and not consider himself better than his fellow Israelites and turn from the law to the right or to the left."* (Deut. 17:19b-20).

The whole tribe of Levi was to live from the *"food offerings presented to the Lord, for that is their inheritance."* (Deut. 18:1). God provided generously for the Levites *"This is the share due the priests from the people who sacrifice a bull or a sheep: the shoulder, the internal organs and the meat from the head. You are to give them the firstfruits of your grain, new wine and olive oil, and the first wool from the shearing of your sheep, for the Lord your God has chosen them and their descendants out of all your tribes to stand and minister in the Lord's name always.* (Deut. 18:3-5)

God clearly prohibits activities of the "occult", telling His people *"Let no one be found among you who sacrifices their son or daughter in the fire, who practices divination or sorcery, interprets omens, engages in witchcraft, or casts spells, or who is a medium or spiritist or who consults the dead. Anyone who does these things is detestable to the Lord; because of these same detestable practices the Lord your God will drive out those nations before you."* (Deut. 18:10-12). Saul disobeyed this by consulting a medium when he wanted to summon up Samuel from the dead and find out the outcome of the battle he was about to fight. (1 Samuel 28:4-25). According to the biblical record, Saul died the next day in battle.

God promises to Moses that He will raise up a prophet to lead His people *"The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you, from your fellow Israelites."* (Deut. 18:15). He will speak only the truth that God gives him, and the penalty for speaking other than what the True God speaks is death: *"But a prophet who presumes to speak in my name anything I have not commanded, or a prophet who speaks in the name of other gods, is to be put to death."* (Deut. 18:20). The words of the prophet will ":come true", assuring the people that these words are

truly from God *“If what a prophet proclaims in the name of the Lord does not take place or come true, that is a message the Lord has not spoken. That prophet has spoken presumptuously, so do not be alarmed.”* (Deut. 18:22). It is confusing (to me at least) that if a prophet makes a prediction that does not come true, the people are not to “be alarmed”, but if he speaks anything that God has not commanded, he is to be put to death. Perhaps the “prediction” was indeed a presumption- and did not carry the weight of a command or instruction from the Lord *(“thus saith the Lord”* Isaiah 45:1 (KJV) and many others)

Next Deuteronomy deals with: a) cities of refuge and b) witnesses. The cities of refuge were given by God as a provision for the person who kills another “accidentally” so that the person can remain alive until a priest/judge determines guilt or innocence. Apparently the “avenger of blood” was sworn to kill this offender even if the death was truly accidental (Deut. 19:6). Three cities were to be provided for this purpose, presumably located so that at all times one city of refuge would be nearby. Three additional cities of refuge were to be identified “If the Lord your God enlarges your territory.” (Deut. 19:8). Deliberate killing, with forethought and malice, is not protected by these cities of refuge (Deut. 19:11-13). A last provision is given against moving a “boundary stone”. This may sound harmless, but it amounted to stealing someone’s (or a tribe’s) inheritance! (Deut. 19:14).

Some of the modern rules of justice are derived from the requirements that convictions be made only at the testimony of “two or three witnesses” (Deut. 19:15). Giving false witness is (and was) a very serious offense*. “If a testimony is thought to be false, then the judge is to thoroughly investigate and if the witness proves to be a liar, giving false testimony against a fellow Israelite, then do to the false witness as that witness intended to do to the other party.”* (Deut. 19:18b-19). One of the purposes of this harsh treatment is to discourage others from offering false testimony *“The rest of the people will hear of this and be afraid, and never again will such an evil thing be done among you.”* (Deut. 19:20)

Mark 14:1-25

Jesus is anointed ay Bethany- in a beautiful gesture, a “woman” (whom John’s Gospel names as Mary) pours a precious perfume on His head. (Mark 14:3). “Some of those present” (the disciples, others, both?) object, saying *“Why this waste of perfume? It could have been sold for more than a year’s wages and the money given to the poor.”* Mark 14:4b-5). Jesus then tells them simply *“Leave her alone,” said Jesus. “Why are you bothering her? She has done a beautiful thing to me. The poor you will always have with you, and you can help them any time you want. But you will not always have me. She did what she could. She poured perfume on my body beforehand to prepare for my burial. Truly I tell you, wherever the gospel is preached throughout the world, what she has done will also be told, in memory of her.”* (Mark 14:6-9) This may have been the “last straw” for Judas Iscariot, who then “went to the chief priests to betray Jesus to them.” (Mark 14:10). Once Judas had committed to this plan of betrayal, he *“watched for an opportunity to hand Him over”* (Mark 14:11)

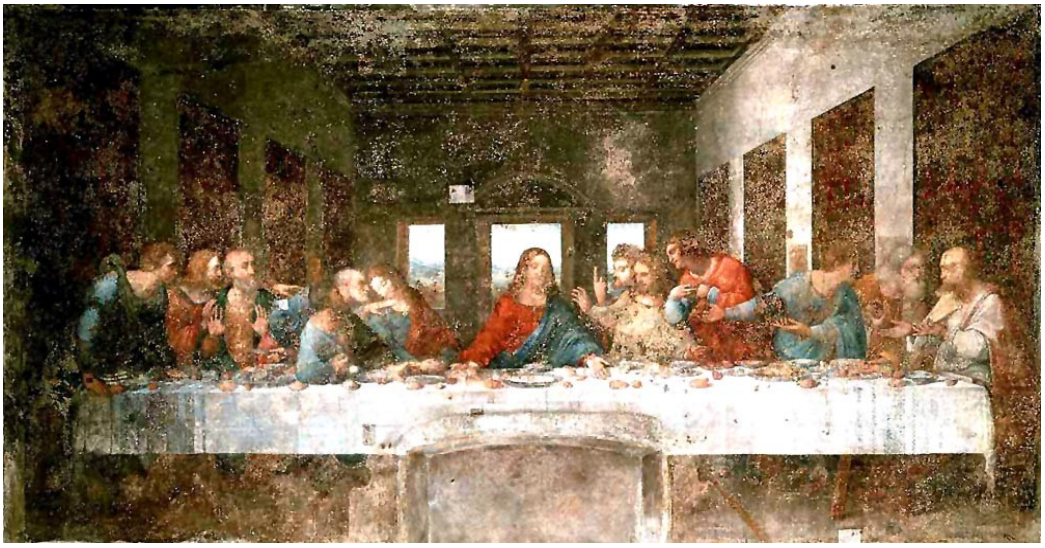
Several things are worthy of our examination here: 1) Jesus’ statement about the “poor”; 2) the extravagance of the woman’s offering; 3) Jesus’ acceptance of this extravagant offering. First, some have suggested that Jesus showed a very uncaring attitude about “the poor” here. A little thought and examination of Scripture will show the fallacy of this notion. Jesus Himself was never wealthy, and more than likely person ally identified with the “poor”. He taught them, healed them, loved them and even called them into discipleship! The woman’s

extravagance suggests that extravagance in loving Jesus is never “extreme” or inappropriate. When we truly love our Lord, we receive a treasure of blessings, not the least of which is His love in return. The fact that Jesus accepted this offering suggests at least two things: 1) He knew that He was One with God and therefore could rightly accept worship; 2) He was accepting what He knew was a preparation for His burial, which was to take place only a few days later.

Marks’ gospel notes that the first day of the Passover was the day of the sacrificial lamb. The True Lamb of God knew that this was the very Passover that He was to be the “Lamb”- later noted by John in his gospel (John 1:29) that this was His true identity. Jesus instructed His disciples to make a “large” room ready for the celebration (Mark 14:15). Note that they were “reclining” at the table (Mark 14:18). This was a common practice in those days, and Leonardo Da Vinci’s famous portrait of the Last Supper is in error at this point, portraying the disciples and Jesus seated at that appears to be a large banquet type table with upright chairs. The Jews commonly reclined at a table such that the table was about knee high. (http://www.julianspriggs.com/Pages/Reclining.aspx)

Jesus then told them “One of you will betray Me” and that one was “eating with me” (Mark 14:17-18). Jesus also adds *“But woe to that man who betrays the Son of Man! It would be better for him if he had not been born.”* (Mark 14:21) It was certainly to be a woeful outcome for Judas- the betrayer who realized too late that his betrayal was of an innocent One- who threw the silver pieces at the “teachers of the law” and hanged himself in remorse. Yet, somehow, Judas himself played an important role in the unfolding plan of God. Jesus was “born to die”, and somehow His death had to take place as it was written in Scripture. God used Judas, just as he used pagan kings and foreign powers (even Rome!) to accomplish His perfect will!

The Scripture than gives a moving account of what was to follow: *“While they were eating, Jesus took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to his disciples, saying, “Take it; this is my body.” Then he took a cup, and when he had given thanks, he gave it to them, and they all drank from it. “This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many,” he said to them. “Truly I tell you, I will not drink again from the fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new in the kingdom of God.”* And Jesus who, in the words of my Pastor Joe Peabody shares with us when we celebrate the Lord’s Supper, “fully understanding and knowing what was to come”- offered Himself as a sacrifice. Very soon He was to see these words brought to life in the amazing and agonizing sacrifice He was to make for all of us whom He loved.



Deuteronomy 20-22 March 13, 2014 Mark 14:26-50

War- who wants to fight? Only the experienced and well trained survive. When God's people went to war, it was the practice to ask *"Has anyone built a new house and not yet begun to live in it? Let him go home, or he may die in battle and someone else may begin to live in it. Has anyone planted a vineyard and not begun to enjoy it? Let him go home, or he may die in battle and someone else enjoy it. Has anyone become pledged to a woman and not married her? Let him go home, or he may die in battle and someone else marry her." Then the officers shall add, "Is anyone afraid or fainthearted? Let him go home so that his fellow soldiers will not become disheartened too." When the officers have finished speaking to the army, they shall appoint commanders over it."* (Deut. 20:5b-9). Not only the winnowing down of the troops, but the rules of engagement were defined. If a city or town surrendered, the lives of the people inside were to be spared- they became prisoners of war and were set to "forced labor" (Deut. 20:11). This sparing of lives of those who surrender only applied to *"all the cities that are at a distance from you and do not belong to the nations nearby."* (Deut. 20:15) These cities were regarded by God as less of a threat to the spiritual purity of God's people, for the nearby cities were to be treated differently *"However, in the cities of the nations the Lord your God is giving you as an inheritance, do not leave alive anything that breathes. Completely destroy them—the Hittites, Amorites, Canaanites, Perizzites, Hivites and Jebusites—as the Lord your God has commanded you. Otherwise, they will teach you to follow all the detestable things they do in worshiping their gods, and you will sin against the Lord your God."* (Deut. 20:16-18)

An unsolved murder required atonement for the guilt of the unknown criminal. A heifer *"that has never been worked and has never worn a yoke"* (Deut. 21:3) will be sacrificed in a valley that is determined to be in the city nearest the crime. This would serve as atonement for this sin *"Then the bloodshed will be atoned for, 9 and you will have purged from yourselves the guilt of shedding innocent blood, since you have done what is right in the eyes of the Lord."* (Deut. 21:8-9)

Marry a captive woman is described next. It is easy to determine how patriarchal the society was at this time, for if the captor notices *a beautiful woman and are attracted to her, you may take her as your wife*. It is the "captive women that are beautiful" who are mentioned, not any "handsome men"! (Deut. 21:11). The captor is advised that if the woman taken as his wife wishes to go, he is to "let her go" and

that *“You must not sell her or treat her as a slave, since you have dishonored her.”* (Deut. 21:14) This to me is a very strange definition of honor and “dishonor”.

Then the issue of the inheritance of the firstborn is dealt with. If a man has a firstborn, not of the wife that he “loves” the actual firstborn is to receive the father’s inheritance, “double” what the other children receive. (Deut. 21:15-17). I personally cannot imagine more than one wife, certainly not more than one at a time.

A rebellious “son” (not daughter) who is a “glutton and and a drunkard” (Deut. 12:20) is to be put to death by stoning. Sounds like the Twelve Step Program was not an option. The next section deals with an executed person whose body is “exposed on a pole” – they are not to remain there overnight. This is very similar to the Scripture that states that cursed is he who hangs on a tree (Col. 3:13). The translation here rendered as “pole” may also be rendered as “tree”. This was also true of Judas, who hanged himself on a tree.

Various rules and laws are given in Deuteronomy 22- a sheep or ox that is wandering should be returned to its owner. The same holds for a “donkey or a cloak” (Deut. 22:3). If an animal has fallen on the road, you are to help the owner right the animal (Deut. 22:4). Men are not to wear women’s clothing, or women a man’s clothing (Deut. 22:5). The Lord “detests” this. If you find a bird’s nest on the road with mother and you, you may take the young but not the mother. So that “it may go well with you and you may have a long life.” (Deut. 22:7). Make sure your house has a parapet around the roof to prevent falls and the “guilt of bloodshed” (Deut. 22:8) Do not mix seeds in the vineyard, or types of animals when plowing, or clothes with wool and linen woven together (Deut. 22:9-11). You are to make tassels on the four corners of the “cloak you wear” (Deut. 22:12) This practice was to remind the wearer of the commands of God- and may have been the “tassels” or “corners” of Jesus’ cloak that the desperate sick woman wished to touch for healing (Matthew 9:20-22).

The rest of Deuteronomy 22 concerns itself with various rules and regulations centered on the actual or attested virginity of a woman to be married. If a man even suspects his new bride is not a virgin, he can demand proof of her virginity- here a “cloth” (Deut. 22:17)- presumably soaked with blood when the woman is entered sexually for the first time. The penalty for adultery is death (to both parties) (Deut. 22:22). If a man sleeps with a virgin “pledged to be married” , then both are to be stoned to death if the violation occurs “in town”- the man because of his evil deed and the woman because she did not scream for help (Deut. 22:23-24). Note that the woman pledged to be married is regarded legally as the man’s “wife”. If the man violates the woman “in the country” only the man is to die since there was “no one to rescue her” when she screamed for help (Deut. 22:25-27). If a man meets a woman pledged to be married and rapes her, and they are “discovered”, then he owes the woman’s father “fifty shekels of silver” (Deut. 22:28-29). He then must marry her and never divorce her. There is no mention of where this event takes place, but presumably it is near other people since they are “discovered”. Lastly a man is not to marry his father’s wife (his stepmother). (Deut. 22:30).

Mark 14:26-50

After the Passover meal, Jesus and the disciples went “to the Mount of Olives” (Mark 14:26) Jesus then predicts Peter’s denials- by the time the cock crows twice Peter will deny Jesus three times (Mark 14:30). Peter insists that he “will not” (Mark 14:29) deny Jesus, but soon the pressure will be on him and the rest of Jesus’ closest friends and followers to “count the cost” of their discipleship (Luke 14:28)

Peter (and the others) insisted *"Even if I have to die with you, I will never disown you."* (Mark 14:31). We like they, often come up short!

They then went to a nearby garden- Gesthemene, and Jesus prayed in earnest while His disciples were to "keep watch" and "pray" (Mark 14:37-38). Jesus must have been discouraged! Here He prayed and begged God for another way to satisfy the need for a perfect sacrifice without the necessity of a gruesome and painful death- a death of dishonor and shame reserved for the worst criminals- and at the hand of Gentile Romans. And then, the moment Jesus decoded to submit to His Father's perfect will, the whole course of history changed! Satan was defeated forever and salvation was possible through the blood to be shed. Jesus said to them *"The hour has come. Look, the Son of Man is delivered into the hands of sinners. **42** Rise! Let us go! Here comes my betrayer!"* (Mark 14:41b-42)

Jesus was then arrested- identified by Judas Iscariot the betrayer. Judas had told them that "the One I kiss" was Jesus, so then *"Going at once to Jesus, Judas said, "Rabbi!" and kissed him."* (Mark 14:45) The man seized Jesus, and "one of those standing near" (Mark 14:47) grabbed his sword and cut off the ear of one of the arresting party (presumably Temple guards). Jesus' words to them were the kind of truth that must have shamed at least some of them *"Am I leading a rebellion," said Jesus, "that you have come out with swords and clubs to capture me? Every day I was with you, teaching in the temple courts, and you did not arrest me. But the Scriptures must be fulfilled."* (Mark 14:48-49). Then *"everyone deserted Him and fled"* (Mark 14:50). These "brave men" who would follow Jesus and "die with Him" fled- only Peter had the courage to follow- and that at a distance.

Deuteronomy 23-25 March 14, 2014 Mark 14:51-72

No male who has been "emasculated" may enter the "assembly of the Lord" (Deut. 23:1). One wonders why this defect in a person would disqualify their entry. Certainly defective animals were correctly excluded from sacrifice- *"I will not*

sacrifice to the Lord my God burnt offerings that cost me nothing.”” (2 Samuel 24:24) Also excluded are those born of a “forbidden marriage” (Deut. 23:2) which can also be rendered as “out of wedlock”. None of the Moabites or Ammonites or their “descendants” may enter the assembly, presumably because of their refusal to assist God’s people when the “left Egypt”, but Edomites and Egyptians are “not to be despised” (Deut. 23:7); their “third generation” can enter the assembly.

Regulations are then given for “uncleanness”, either from a nocturnal emission or from human waste (Deut. 23:10-14). Slaves who have “taken refuge” with you are not to be turned over to their masters; no Israelite man or woman is to a shrine prostitute (Deut. 23:15-18). These practices were rejected by God, and were common in the pagan religious practices of the pagan nations surrounding Israel.

No interest is to be charged to a “fellow Hebrew” but it was permissible to charge interest to a foreigner (Deut. 23:19-20). Vows to the Lord must be kept, but there was no “guilt” incurred of the one not making such a vow. (Deut. 23:21-22). The principle was, if you “say it or make a vow to the Lord, do it!” *“Whatever your lips utter you must be sure to do, because you made your vow freely to the Lord your God with your own mouth.”*

Some of us are fond of sampling foods in grocery stores and similar establishments. There was a similar practice which was acceptable among God’s people: “*If you enter your neighbor’s vineyard, you may eat all the grapes you want, but do not put any in your basket. If you enter your neighbor’s grainfield, you may pick kernels with your hands, but you must not put a sickle to their standing grain.”* (Deut. 23:24-25).

Deuteronomy 24 is a “laundry list of laws, regulations and decrees (Deut. 24:1-20):

1) A man who divorces a woman because he finds “something indecent about her” , is not to remarry her after she marries another man and is then divorced from him (or he dies)
2) A newlywed is given a one year reprieve from going to war;
3) Millstones are not to be taken in pledge – this would be taking one’s livelihood
4) Kidnapping or selling a fellow Hebrew into slavery is punishable by death
5) “Defiling skin diseases” must be handled as prescribed by the priests
6) Don’t take something from the “house” of a person who is indebted, and don’t take his cloak (or return it by sunset). The cloak was used as a “sleeping bag” and protection from the cold
7) Pay a day laborer their just wages before sundown
8) Parents should not die for their children’s sin, or children for their parents’ sin
9) Do not deprive the foreigner or orphan their justice; do not take the cloak of a widow in pledge (see also http://www.galaxie.com/article/bspade04-3-08)
10) Leave the gleanings in the field so the *“foreigner, the fatherless and the widow.”* (Deut. 24:21)

Deuteronomy 25 continues the “miscellaneous” list: (Deut. 25:1-19).

1) A judge must decide the guilty and innocent parties in a dispute in a court. If flogging is the penalty, it must not exceed forty lashes- this would be degrading

2) Don't muzzle an ox when it is treading out the grain (see http://www.tillhecomes.org/do-not-muzzle-the-ox/)
3) When a man dies, his brother should marry his widow to carry on the family name and line of descent (see the review of the recent movie "Loving Leah" http://www.imdb.com/title/tt1346983/reviews)
4) A man can refuse his deceased brother's widow in marriage, but it must be done in a ceremony before witnesses (this is called the "halizah" ceremony), and afterwards the refusing man's family is to be labeled as "unsandaled"
5) A woman aiding her husband in a fight who grabs the opponent by his "private parts" shall have her hand cut off, with "no pity"
6) Only honest scales and weights must be used- not "one heavy" and "one light" . My former colleagues at the US National Institutes of Standards and Technology would be proud!
7) The Amalekites should be "blotted out" (Deut. 25:19) because of their treachery when the Israelites came out of Egypt *"When you were weary and worn out, they met you on your journey and attacked all who were lagging behind; they had no fear of God."* (Deut. 25:18)

Mark 14:51-72

A young man flees from the arrest scene- and leaves his linen garment- he was so terrified that he left naked! This must have been tumultuous and terrifying. Perhaps the only "calm" person in the whole event was Jesus Himself.

Then Jesus was taken to the chief priests- at night- and a parade of witnesses was produced, "but their statements did not agree". (Mark 14:56). The chief priests and the high priest were seeking evidence that this 'rabbi" deserved the death penalty. Several testified about Jesus' statement about the Temple, that He would "destroy it" and rebuild it after three days in a form "not made by hands" (Mark 14:57-59). And even their testimonies did not agree (Mark 14:59). Clearly Jesus was describing Himself- He would be "destroyed" and in three days return as a transformed and transfigured spiritual body- certainly one made by God and not by "hands". It is possible that the disagreement of the testimony about this statement was due to simple misunderstanding- this was a teaching that had never been heard before- or maybe the testimonies didn't agree because God wanted His Son to speak the truth about who He was- thus providing His enemies with evidence of "blasphemy" (Mark 14:64).

Once Jesus' enemies heard Him say:""I am," said Jesus. "And you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven."(Mark 14:62) they had what they needed- and God's truth, and the amazing truth that Jesus uttered- was received in hatred and fear rather than in amazement and peace!

Remember Peter..? He had declaring his undying loyalty to Jesus. And yet when the true test came- in the form of a question about his association with Jesus, he denied Him. But he denied it. “I don’t know or understand what you’re talking about,” he said, and went out into the entryway. (Mark 14:68). His first denial was of being with Him. The second denial was “being one of them (the disciples of Jesus)” The Scripture reports that they accused Peter of being a disciple: “This fellow is one of them.” (Mark 14:69). He then denied it (Mark 14:70). That was the second denial. Once more, the accusation came: *“Surely you are one of them, for you are a Galilean.”* (Mark 14:70b). And Peter denied this accusation, with “curses” (Mark 14:71), saying “I don’t know this man you’re talking about”. Then the cock crowed a second time- dawn was approaching, and the mighty fisherman remembered Jesus’ words and was reduced to bitter tears of shame! (Mark 14:72)

Deuteronomy 26-27 March 15, 2014 Mark 15:1-26

“When you have entered the land the Lord your God is giving you” (Deut. 26:1)- then take the “first fruits” that the land produces and give thanks to God. This giving of “the best” was symbolic of the desire God’s people had to show great gratitude to Him. They were then to say

“My father was a wandering Aramean, and he went down into Egypt with a few people and lived there and became a great nation, powerful and numerous. But the Egyptians mistreated us and made us suffer, subjecting us to harsh labor. Then we cried out to the LORD, the God of our ancestors, and the LORD heard our voice and saw our misery, toil and oppression. So the LORD brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, with great terror and with signs and wonders. He brought us to this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey; and now I bring the firstfruits of the soil that you, LORD, have given me.” (Deut. 26:5b-10). By reciting and remembering what God has done, we make a place in our hearts for God and are blessed by the remembrance.

In the third year of occupation the tithe is to go to *“the Levite, the foreigner, the fatherless and the widow, so that they may eat in your towns and be satisfied.”*

(Deut. 26:12b) Once the tithe is given ,the people are to ask God for blessing in this land of “milk and honey” (Deut. 26:15). The admonition is then given to obey God’s commands and laws “with all your heart and with all your soul”- for in doing this you will be practicing the Law of God with your heart as well as your mind, and God can (and will!) bless you. This is similar to the “Shema” we saw in Deuteronomy 6. And then the Lord claims His people *“And the LORD has declared this day that you are his people, his treasured possession as he promised, and that you are to keep all his commands.”* He claims them as His “treasured possession” and shows His great love in this way.

Then an altar is made, the order is given to set up “some large stones and coat them with plaster.” (Deut. 27:2) on Mount Ebal (not EBay!) so that the passage into the Promised Land will be remembered and memorialized. This is to be part of an altar, and no “iron tool” is to be used (Deut. 27:5). The stones were to be dressed by hand similar to the practice later in building the Temple (1 Kings 6:7). Sacrifice is to be practiced on the “altar of stones” with joy and rejoicing *“Sacrifice fellowship offerings there, eating them and rejoicing in the presence of the Lord your God. And you shall write very clearly all the words of this law on these stones you have set up.”* (Deut 27:7b-8).

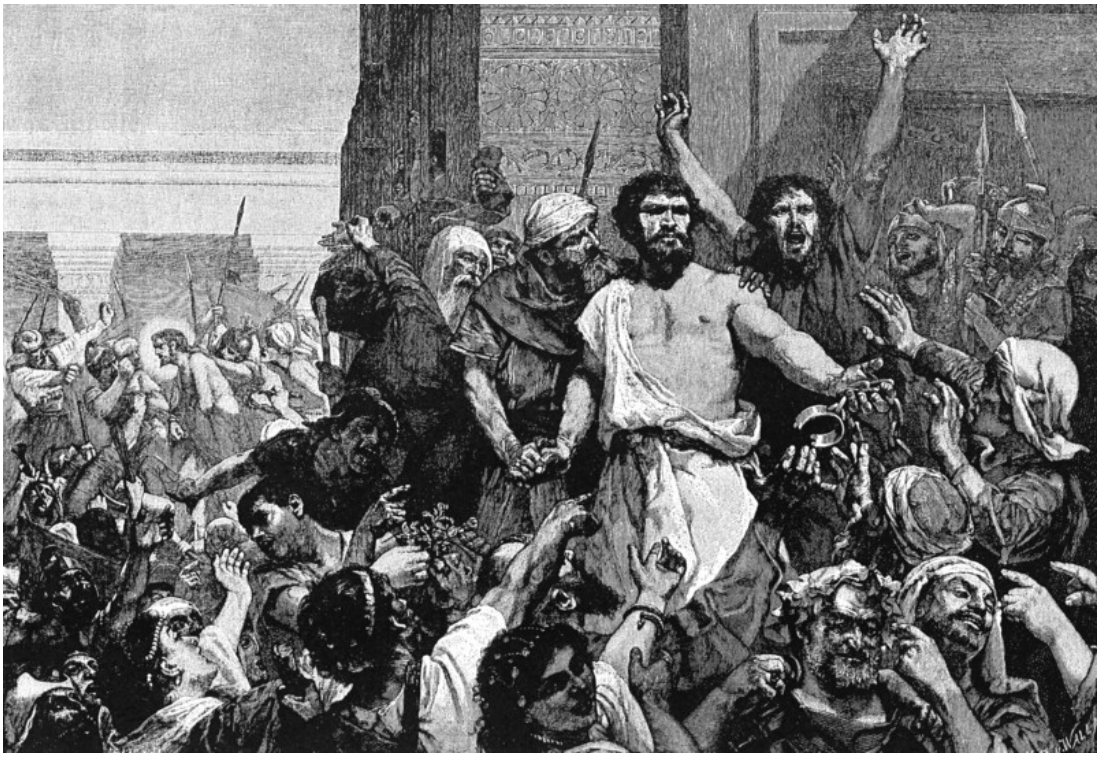
The people then – as of that day of crossing over- became God’s people in a sense they had not before. As Moses told them *“Be silent, Israel, and listen! You have now become the people of the Lord your God. Obey the Lord your God and follow his commands and decrees that I give you today.”* (Deut. 27:9b-10). Then a long “list of things cursed” is spoken out loud: 1) making idols; 2) dishonoring father and mother; 3) moving a neighbor’s boundary stone; 4) leading the blind astray on a road; 5) withholding justice (especially from the powerless); 6) sleeping with your father’s wife; 7) having sex with an animal; 8) sleeping with a sister of mother-in-law; 9) killing a neighbor “secretly” (I guess the same would be true for killing a neighbor in broad daylight?); 9) accepting a bribe to kill an innocent person; 10) not upholding the words of Law by “not carrying them out” (actual obedience was the object, not agreement with the Law). All of these are declared “cursed” and the people all said “Amen” (Deut. 27:14-26).

Photograph of an altar found on Mount Ebal by Dr. Adam Zertal in 1980.

Mark 15:1-26

So who is Jesus, really? Teacher, preacher, prophet, priest, rabbi, healer…..king? This was asked of Jesus as He stood before Pilate. Only the Romans could carry out the death penalty, so on to the Roman leader they took Jesus. "Are you the king of the Jews?" asked Pilate. Surely Pilate had heard of Him. It was Pilate's job to know what was happening with the Jews, especially anything that might lead to trouble and cause him trouble. "You have said so" Jesus replied. (Mark 15:2). Many accusations were brought against Jesus by the high priests, but Jesus did not answer! Pilate then asked ""Aren't you going to answer? See how many things they are accusing you of." (Mark 15:4). Yet Jesus was silent. As the spiritual says "He never said a mublin' word". In Isaiah 53:7b we read: *"He was led as a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before its shearers is silent, so He opened not His mouth."* Would Jesus have changed history- or spiritual history- by speaking and answering His accusers?

BarAbbas was offered to the crowd to be released; as was Jesus. BarAbbas was a known murderer and insurrectionist. Matthew 27:16 refers to him as a "notorious prisoner" Luke mentions that he was involved in a riot (Luke 23:19). Mark's gospel says: *"A man called Barabbas was in prison with the insurrectionists who had committed murder in the uprising."* (Mark 15:7) . here we see an interesting observation: *"Pilate, 10 knowing it was out of self-interest that the chief priests had handed Jesus over to him."* (Mark 15:9b-10). So Pilate knew the "politics" of the religious group clamoring for Jesus to be killed, and then asked: *"What shall I do, then, with the one you call the king of the Jews?" Pilate asked them."Crucify him!" they shouted. "Why? What crime has he committed?" asked Pilate. But they shouted all the louder, "Crucify him!"* (Mark 15:12b-14). Then the Scripture states *"Wanting to satisfy the crowd, Pilate released Barabbas to them. He had Jesus flogged, and handed him over to be crucified."* (Mark 15:15)



"Give us Barabbas!", from The Bible and its Story Taught by One Thousand Picture Lessons, 1910

Pilate knew the truth, or at least enough of the truth to know this One was innocent, yet he also wanted to avoid trouble- and help himself! Truly this was a tragedy- to know the truth and know that you could have prevented an innocent person's death and then not prevent it….this must have made an impact on Pilate. And yet Pilate had Him flogged and turned over to the soldiers to be crucified.

Now the soldiers mocked Jesus. They were in a foreign outpost, hated by many of the Jews, and were likely to be frustrated and bored. Now they had the opportunity to torment their helpless (or so they thought) captive. *"They put a purple robe on him, then twisted together a crown of thorns and set it on him. And they began to call out to him, "Hail, king of the Jews!" Again and again they struck him on the head with a staff and spit on him. Falling on their knees, they paid homage to him. And when they had mocked him, they took off the purple robe and put his own clothes on him."* (Mark 15:17b-20). Someone once said, the true character of a person can be determined by observing how they treat persons they do not need to be kind or understanding to. Watch how a person treats wait staff at a restaurant, or a sales clerk in a department store, and you will gain insight into their true character. These soldiers showed the cruelty and indifference to suffering as they made fun of the half dead person in their custody, a person who had been beaten nearly to death and had no sleep in the previous long night. They were only "following orders"….but the orders were cruel and inhumane Perhaps Mel Gibson's movie "The Passion of the Christ" goes to extremes in the brutal flogging scene, but I have always been moved to tears by it. My tears are not only for Jesus as he endures the intense and relentless pain inflicted on Him, but my tears are also for the soldiers who by dehumanizing Him, dehumanized themselves!

As Jesus was led to the place of crucifixion, outside the city, at Golgotha “the place of the skull”, a Cyrene named Simon was forced to carry the cross for Jesus. We would guess he was so nearly dead and weak that he was unable to carry this wooden instrument of death and torture. (mark 15:2-23). The place Jesus was crucified was somewhat like a “city dump”. (http://abcnews.go.com/2020/story?id=124100). There they “crucified Him” and “divided His clothes by “casting lots” (Mark 15:24). It was nine in the morning (Mark 15:25).

Those who hold to the tenets of the “Passover Plot” (Schonfield, 1965) may well wonder how Jesus arranged for this detail to take place. Jesus could certainly be silent before Pilate, and refuse to drink “wine mixed with myrrh”- after all he had said the night before that he would not drink “the fruit of the vine” until He arose in glory in the coming of the Kingdom of God (Mark 14:25). But how could He have caused the soldiers to “cast lots” for His clothing? How could he have caused an “earthquake” and “splitting of the veil in the Temple”? (Matthew 27:51) Only the very Son of God would have these events mark His earthly passing!

Deuteronomy 28 March 16, 2014 Mark 15:27-47

If…then- the statements of logic. In Deuteronomy 28 we see a spiritual logic expressed. If ”you fully obey the Lord your God and carefully follow all his commands I give you today” (Deut. 28:1) then *“the Lord your God will set you high above all the nations on earth. All these blessings will come on you and accompany you if you obey the Lord your God.”* (Deut. 28:1b-2)

The list of blessings: 1) blessed everywhere- I n the city and the country; 2) the fruit of your womb, crops of your land and the young of your livestock; 3) basket and kneeling trough; 4) when you go out and when you come in; 5) defeat of your enemies- they will come at you in one direction and leave in seven; 6) your barns and everything you set your hand to; 7) the Lord will establish you as His holy people; 8) the Lord will open the heavens to send rain on your land in season and bless all the work of your hands; 9) you will lend to many nations and borrow from none; 10) you will be the head and not the tail; 11) you will be at the top and not the bottom. (Deut. 28:3-13) All this blessing will happen *“if you pay attention to the commands of the Lord your God that I give you this day and carefully follow them”* (Deut. 28:13) Notice it is not sufficient to “pay attention” to the commands- they must be followed!

Then the list of woes and curses is given if *“you do not obey the Lord your God and do not carefully follow all His decrees..”* (Deut. 28:15): 1) cursed everywhere- in the city and in the country; 2) your basket and kneeling trough will be cursed; 3) the fruit of your womb, crops of your land, calves of your herd, and lambs of your flocks will be cursed; 4) cursed when you go in and come out; 5) confusion and rebuke of everything you put your hand to until you are *“destroyed and come to sudden ruin because of the evil you have done in forsaking him.”* (Deut. 28:20); 6) the Lord will plague you with diseases; 7) the Lord will turn the rain into “dust and powder”; 7) the Lord will cause you to be defeated by your enemies; 8) the Lord will afflict you with blindness and madness; 8) you will be oppressed and robbed with no one to rescue you; 9) you will be pledged to be married to a woman, and someone will take her and rape her; 10) you will plant a vineyard but not enjoy its fruit; 11) your ox will be slaughtered but you will not eat of it, your donkey will be taken and not returned, your sheep will be given to your enemies, and no one will rescue them; 12) your sons and daughters will be given to another nation, and you will “wear out your eyes” looking for them, powerless to help them; 13) a “people you do not know” (Deut. 28:33) will eat the produce of your land and cruelly oppress you; 14)

you will be afflicted with painful boils that do not heal; 15) the Lord will drive you to another nation Unknown to you and "There you will worship other gods, gods of wood and stone." (Deut. 28:36); 16) you will become "a thing of horror, a byword and an object of ridicule" (Deut. 28:37); 17) you will sow seed but not reap because locusts will devour your crops; 18) you will plant vineyards and not eat from them because worms will eat the grapes; 19) you will have olive trees and not use the oil because the olives will fall off the tree; 20) your sons and daughters will go into captivity; 21) swarms of locusts will consume your crops; 22) foreigners who reside among you will rule over you- they will lend to you not you to them and they will "rise" and you will "sink" – they will be the "head" and you the "tail" (Deut. 28:16-44). These are not an exhaustive list of the curses and woes, but the picture is clear.

The Scripture even goes as far as describing a siege from a foreign power (Deut. 28:52) and the conditions inside the city will be so dire that even the children of God's people will be eaten (Deut. 28:52-57). God will send fearful plagues (Deut. 28:59) and scatter you among all the nations (Deut. 28:64). There will be terror and "no rest" for God's people: *"Among those nations you will find no repose, no resting place for the sole of your foot. There the Lord will give you an anxious mind, eyes weary with longing, and a despairing heart. You will live in constant suspense, filled with dread both night and day, never sure of your life. In the morning you will say, "If only it were evening!" and in the evening, "If only it were morning!"—because of the terror that will fill your hearts and the sights that your eyes will see. The Lord will send you back in ships to Egypt on a journey I said you should never make again. There you will offer yourselves for sale to your enemies as male and female slaves, but no one will buy you."* (Deut. 28:65-68).

So which would you choose? Obedience and prosperity or disobedience and curses, suffering, cannibalism and depression with "no rest"? Surely if God's people believed the word of God spoken through Moses they would gladly and enthusiastically follow God. Yet the history of God's people is a seemingly endless cycle; First, obedience and prosperity; then "self-righteousness, a feeling of "entitlement and privilege" and hollow worship and empty spiritual lives; then comes God's punishment (actually God simply permits the sin to take its logical course and cause misery and suffering; then the people cry out to God- God sends a prophet and the people repent; then the cycle starts again. Was there not a "bell" that went off in somebody's brain that said "Here we go again…if we would just obey God we would prosper, have peace and plenty!" Or are we truly like "sheep" as God says, and follow the crowd to destruction and care only about ourselves? No wonder God needed to send us a Savior! Our sin problem was (and is) serious and irreparable apart from the wonderful and undeserved grace of God!

Mark 15:27-47

They crucified "two rebels" with Him- one to His left and one to the right. As the wonderful song goes (Harley Campbell). the "Man in the Middle was Jesus"! Jesus was insulted both by His enemies- the chief priests, Pharisees and others, as well as the two crucified with Him. I can only imagine Jesus' heartbreak- for He loved even these- as He heard these words: *"So! You who are going to destroy the temple and build it in three days, come down from the cross and save yourself!"* and *"He saved others," they said, "but he can't save himself! Let this Messiah, this king of Israel, come down now from the cross, that we may see and believe."* (Mark 15:29-32). So the people wanted "one last miracle"- a display of power so they would "believe". Even if Jesus had summoned the "legions of angels" (Matthew 26:53) to remove

Himself from the cross and perform miracles, the stone hearted critics would never truly believe. They were of the mentality "What have you done for me lately?" and "What's in it for me?" They were almost daring Jesus to perform another miracle and save Himself by demonstrating His power. Jesus knew that this was the way His Father had set before Him, and He sacrificed Himself- gave Himself up willingly (John 10:17-18), so that we could obtain the gift we don't deserve and could never earn- that gift of salvation and power over our sin!

At three in the afternoon- after 6 agonizing hours on the cross, Jesus cried out *"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"* (Mark 15:34). Had God really forsaken Jesus? Or was the burden of sin that He carried so great that He was struggling under its enormous weight? He "felt" alone, but really was not in any sense alone. God was WITH Him, just as He is WITH us! Jesus' human nature indeed was in agony, pain, despair and felt alone, but God was right there with His beloved Son- to the very end of His earthly life.

A sponge with wine vinegar was offered to Jesus, but the person offering it said "Now leave him alone. Let's see if Elijah comes to take him down," (Mark 15:36). They had guessed that Jesus was "calling Elijah" and were curious to see if Elijah would save Jesus (Mark 15:35). Then the Scripture tells us: *"With a loud cry, Jesus breathed his last."* (Mark 15:37). End or beginning? The wonderful answer is that this moment was both- it was the end of Jesus' ministry on earth, but the beginning of the Kingdom of God, which was coming *"in power"* (Mark 9:1) as the disciples- who here were scattered- would receive the Holy Spirit in power later in Jerusalem. (Acts 2:4).

A centurion who witnessed Jesus' crucifixion and death said "Surely this man was the Son of God." (Mark 15:39). Sermons, songs and a classis biblical drama film "The Greatest Story Ever Told" have rendered this moment in a variety of ways. No person ever hearing John Wayne as a centurion could forget his memorable rendition of this passage. This utterance by John Wayne as the centurion is part of some amazing trivia about the filming of this 1965 classic. (http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0059245/trivia) . And yet this testimony by a Gentile- presumable not a believer in God- has inspired many. Even in death, Jesus was a witness to the power and majesty of His heavenly Father!

Even those who loved Him most were standing "at a distance" (Mark 15:40). Mary Magdalene and "Mary the mother of James" had witnessed it all…were they tired, afraid, lonely without this One who had touched them so deeply? (Mark 15:40). The Scripture tells us that "many other women" were also there (Mark 15:41).

It was Preparation Day, the "day before the Sabbath" – a Friday, and Joseph of Arimathea, who was 'himself waiting for the kingdom of God, went boldly to Pilate and asked for Jesus' body." (Mark 15:42-43). Pilate was *"surprised to hear that he (Jesus) was already dead"* (Mark 15:44). Pilate verified that Jesus had died by checking with a centurion, and then allowed Joseph to take the body. (Mark 15:45). Joseph then offered a tomb "cut out of a rock", and after wrapping Jesus' body in linen cloth, he placed the body in the tomb and *"rolled a stone against the entrance of the tomb"* (Mark 15:46). The "two Marys" saw where He was laid (Mark 15:47). Some have made a great issue of the variance in the details of Jesus' death and burial. Some resources include: 1) W.F. Arndt, Does the Bible Contradict Itself?, 5th rev. ed., Concordia Press, 1955; 2) Josh McDowell , Answers to Tough Questions that Skeptics Ask About the Christian Faith, Living Books, 1986. Most of these "inconsistencies" are easily explained by the fact that the gospel writers were reporting different eyewitness accounts of the same event. For example, the

recorded “last words of Jesus” on the cross are typically drawn from all the gospel accounts. The fact that one or another of Jesus’ words from the cross are either included or omitted does not in any way suggest inconsistency or error. The bottom line for most skeptics (who may call themselves “spiritual but not churched”, “agnostics” or even “atheists”) is that if the believe that Jesus was who he said He was, then their lives would have to change. They would no longer be the “master of my fate, the captain of my soul” (William Ernest Henley, Echoes of Life and Death); but would eventually have to submit to the true Master!

Deuteronomy 29-30 March 17, 2014 Mark 16

God is a covenant maker, and a promise keeper. We are the covenant breakers and promise breakers. God’s Word is sure and steadfast- His character is unimpeachable, and His promises are the solid rock on which we can build out lives. God told His people through Moses *“Carefully follow the terms of this covenant, so that you may prosper in everything you do.”* (Deut. 29:9). There are several parts to this statement worthy of note- 1) we must carefully follow God’s law- this requires a conscious diligence, soul searching , and communicating with Him so that we truly “seek His will” in everything. It requires that we have a healthy and ongoing prayer life. It requires that we are willing to surrender to His will at every point; 2) the result an consequence of this following of God’s will is prosperity. We must not confuse the prosperity here with purely material prosperity. We all know that the “wicked” prosper (Jer. 12:1; Psalm 37:7; Psalm 73; Job 21:7). But their prosperity is not in treasure that is eternal! As Jesus teaches us to lay up eternal treasure (Matt. 16:19-21)- and that results from our prosperity with Him.

Amazingly, God’s people seem never to learn their lessons as to what is important-vital to their continued “prosperity”. God reminds them of what he has just done for them; *“Your eyes have seen all that the Lord did in Egypt to Pharaoh, to all his officials and to all his land. With your own eyes you saw those great trials, those signs and great wonders. But to this day the Lord has not given you a mind that understands or eyes that see or ears that hear. Yet the Lord says, “During the forty years that I led you through the wilderness, your clothes did not wear out, nor did the sandals on your feet. You ate no bread and drank no wine or other fermented drink. I did this so that you might know that I am the Lord your God.”* (Deut. 29:2b-

6). Somehow, the people don't see or even remember God's amazing goodness and provision for them. So, again, they must be reminded.

So God is offering a new covenant, one that is entered into on the threshold of a new life for God's people in the Land He has promised: *"You are standing here in order to enter into a covenant with the Lord your God, a covenant the Lord is making with you this day and sealing with an oath, to confirm you this day as his people, that he may be your God as he promised you and as he swore to your fathers, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. I am making this covenant, with its oath, not only with you who are standing here with us today in the presence of the Lord our God but also with those who are not here today."* (Deut. 29:12-15)

God clearly warns His people that they are not to use His covenant as a cloak of convenience- a magic wand that will keep them safe like a token or an amulet- we are not to misuse the blessing of God to justify our own way: *"When such a person hears the words of this oath and they invoke a blessing on themselves, thinking, "I will be safe, even though I persist in going my own way," they will bring disaster on the watered land as well as the dry. The Lord will never be willing to forgive them; his wrath and zeal will burn against them. All the curses written in this book will fall on them, and the Lord will blot out their names from under heaven. The Lord will single them out from all the tribes of Israel for disaster, according to all the curses of the covenant written in this Book of the Law."* (Deut. 29:19-21) God is not mocked! (Gal. 6:7).

So the choice is clear- prosperity or plagues; obedience and plenty or disobedience and famine and disease. God has revealed His will to us and given His law, we have been given clear instructions. There is still much of God we do not know or that is unknowable- there is always mystery in His being: *"The secret things belong to the LORD our God, but the things revealed belong to us and to our children forever, that we may follow all the words of this law."* (Deut. 29:29). God does keep some things "secret"- shrouded in mystery- but he also makes clear to us what we need to know to follow Him.

Then God promises to put His law on our hearts, as He promised in Jeremiah 31:33. He tells the people: *"When all these blessings and curses I have set before you come on you and you take them to heart wherever the Lord your God disperses you among the nations, and when you and your children return to the Lord your God and obey him with all your heart and with all your soul according to everything I command you today, then the Lord your God will restore your fortunes[b] and have compassion on you and gather you again from all the nations where he scattered you. Even if you have been banished to the most distant land under the heavens, from there the Lord your God will gather you and bring you back. He will bring you to the land that belonged to your ancestors, and you will take possession of it. He will make you more prosperous and numerous than your ancestors. The Lord your God will circumcise your hearts and the hearts of your descendants, so that you may love him with all your heart and with all your soul, and live."* (Deut. 30:1-6) And later God tells the people that he will *"again delight in you"* (Deut. 30:9).

The summary of God's new covenant agreement is given at the end of Deuteronomy 30*; "This day I call the heavens and the earth as witnesses against you that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Now choose life, so that you and your children may live and that you may love the Lord your God, listen to his voice, and hold fast to him. For the Lord is your life, and he will give you many years in the land he swore to give to your fathers, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.*

(Deut. 30:19-20). So we, as they, should always "choose life". And this is not just life, but a life of abundance, joy, and real prosperity.

Mark 16

The wildly improbable, unexpected- but predicted- event has now occurred. The disciples- terrified, disheartened, scattered and disillusioned heard the news from the two Marys- Magdalene and the mother of James (and Jesus), who went with Salome to anoint Jesus' body. They were concerned and asked each other: *"Who will roll the stone away from the entrance of the tomb?"* (Mark 16:3) It would have been quite a task, it was probably a large stone- too heavy to be easily moved even by three women. Then there were two wonderful surprises from God- the God of Serendipity – "the unexpected and valuable things not sought for" (see James 1:17)- 1) the stone was rolled away, and 2) the tomb had an unexpected inhabitant! The Scripture records that *"they saw a young man dressed in a white robe sitting on the right side, and they were alarmed."* (Mark 16:5). Seeing their alarm and fear, the angel said to them *"Don't be alarmed," he said. "You are looking for Jesus the Nazarene, who was crucified. He has risen! He is not here. See the place where they laid him. But go, tell his disciples and Peter, 'He is going ahead of you into Galilee. There you will see him, just as he told you.'"* (Mark 16:6-7) We are told that the women left: *"Trembling and bewildered, the women went out and fled from the tomb. They said nothing to anyone, because they were afraid."* (Mark 16:8)

The earliest manuscripts omit Mark 9-20. Later versions of the gospel include this portion of Mark. It may have been written later, or added to harmonize with the other gospel accounts. Please see (http://www.bible-researcher.com/endmark.html) for a more complete discussion. The gospel account here in this "additional" fragment certainly seem consistent in detail and tone with the other gospel accounts, for which there is less discussion about the events after the Resurrection. I will treat them here as "authentic" and part of the record with equal authority as the rest of Mark's gospel.

Mark 9-20 records Jesus' appearance to Mary, *"out of whom he had driven seven demons"* (Mark 16:9). We see a reference to this event in Luke 8:2. She told those *"who had been with Him"* but they did not believe it (Mark 16:10-11). I would not have believed the resurrection either! The disciples had been told, warned and instructed about both the crucifixion and resurrection, but could not even comprehend it, much less believe it. Some things are truly too good (Resurrection) or bad (crucifixion) to be easily believed. But the truth is not dependent on our believing it- it is the truth nonetheless. Jesus then appears to two *"walking in the country"*- this may be a reference to the event we now describe as the walk to Emmaus recorded in Luke's gospel (Luke 24:13-35). These two reported Jesus' appearance, but the disciples still did not believe. (Mark 16: 12-13). It is notable that Jesus appeared to them "in a different form"- according to Luke's gospel the two travelers did not recognize Jesus by sight, but only when they broke bread with Him after listening to His account of His place in the Scriptures.

Jesus' (and God the Father's) plan was to "make disciples of the world" (Matthew 28:16-20), and He could hardly do that with reclusive and disbelieving disciples. So He *"appeared to the Eleven as they were eating"* and *"rebuked them for their lack of faith"* (Mark 16:14). Then He gave them their "marching orders": *"Go into all the world and preach the gospel to all creation. Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned. And these signs will*

accompany those who believe: In my name they will drive out demons; they will speak in new tongues; they will pick up snakes with their hands; and when they drink deadly poison, it will not hurt them at all; they will place their hands on sick people, and they will get well." (Mark 16:15b-18) This command is very similar to that in Matthew 28- and lists some of the "credentials" that will mark the disciples' power. They will heal, baptize, and speak in "new tongues". According to the practices of some churches, they will also "pick up snakes" (notice it doesn't specify poisonous snakes!), and "drink deadly poison" which will "not hurt them". I will leave these practices to the "religious sociologists….some seem to feel that these practices are "badges of honor"- but when they are used to glorify ourselves instead of God they are not commendable.

Jesus was then "taken up into heaven" and sits at God's right hand (the place of honor at the table) (Mark 16:19) The disciples believed Jesus, and did what He told them! They *"went out and preached everywhere"* and Jesus was with them and "*confirmed his word by the signs that accompanied it."* (Mark 16:19). The "signs", to them at least, were badges of authority and credentials. We have seen previously how many times Jesus Himself was asked to produce "a sign".

Mark ends at 16:8 in 4th century Codex Vaticanus Graecus 1209 (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mark_16)

Deuteronomy 31-32 March 18, 2014 Luke 1:1-23

Moses was nearing the end of his life and leadership of God's people. He knew that there was much yet to be accomplished before that Promised Land was the true home of Israel, but God had plans for a successor. Moses said to the people: *"I am now a hundred and twenty years old and I am no longer able to lead you. The LORD has said to me, 'You shall not cross the Jordan.' The LORD your God himself will cross over ahead of you. He will destroy these nations before you, and you will take possession of their land. Joshua also will cross over ahead of you, as the LORD said. And the LORD will do to them what he did to Sihon and Og, the kings of the Amorites, whom he destroyed along with their land The LORD will deliver them to you, and you must do to them all that I have commanded you. Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid or terrified because of them, for the LORD your God goes with you; he will never leave you nor forsake you."* (Deut. 31:1b-6)The words "be strong and courageous" were to be repeated several more times, as Moses commissioned Joshua as his successor. Moses told Joshua: *"Be*

strong and courageous, for you must go with this people into the land that the Lord swore to their ancestors to give them, and you must divide it among them as their inheritance. 8 The Lord himself goes before you and will be with you; he will never leave you nor forsake you. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged." (Deut. 31:7b-8) Both strength and courage were clearly required to accomplish this monumental task…yet God had a plan all along to do just that- and establish His people in the Land of Promise.

The Law was then read. It was not as if at least some of the people were familiar with it- the Levites were literally immersed in it night and day. God's Word always has power, and never "returns empty" (Isaiah 55:11) Moses declared that at the end of seven years: *"you shall read this law before them in their hearing. Assemble the people—men, women and children, and the foreigners residing in your towns—so they can listen and learn to fear the Lord your God and follow carefully all the words of this law. Their children, who do not know this law, must hear it and learn to fear the Lord your God as long as you live in the land you are crossing the Jordan to possess."* (Deut. 31:11b-13)

During the process of the ordination of Joshua as the new leader of the people, the Lord predicted that the people would turn from Him and forsake Him, and that such rebellion and disobedience would carry a penalty: *"You are going to rest with your ancestors, and these people will soon prostitute themselves to the foreign gods of the land they are entering. They will forsake me and break the covenant I made with them. And in that day I will become angry with them and forsake them; I will hide my face from them, and they will be destroyed. Many disasters and calamities will come on them, and in that day they will ask, 'Have not these disasters come on us because our God is not with us?'* (Deut. 31:16b-17) This was not God's wish, preference or perfect will, but He knew His people well, and accurately predicted that they would have a long history of turning from Him. God then asked Moses to record a Song, so that the words of the song would be a witness "for me against them." (Deut. 31:19). God did not leave Joshua (or the people) to their own devices, as God promised to Joshua *""Be strong and courageous, for you will bring the Israelites into the land I promised them on oath, and I myself will be with you."* (Deut. 31:23b). God then repeats His concerns about these "rebellious and stiff necked" people (Deut. 31:27). Then God gave Moses the Song, and it was sung before the people.

The song praises God and His attributes:

I will proclaim the name of the Lord.
Oh, praise the greatness of our God!
He is the Rock, his works are perfect,
and all his ways are just.
A faithful God who does no wrong,
upright and just is he. (Deut. 32:3-4)

and gives an honest and unflinching portrayal of the people and their faithlessness, in contrast to the faithful and promise keeping God:

They are corrupt and not his children;
to their shame they are a warped and crooked generation.
Is this the way you repay the Lord,
you foolish and unwise people?
Is he not your Father, your Creator

who made you and formed you? (Deut. 32:5-6)

And yet within the words of the song there is a promise of forgiveness and reconciliation, despite the sins of the people: “When Moses finished reciting all these words to all Israel, he said to them, “Take to heart all the words I have solemnly declared to you this day, so that you may command your children to obey carefully all the words of this law. They are not just idle words for you—they are your life. By them you will live long in the land you are crossing the Jordan to possess.” (Deut. 32-45-47). The Word was- and is- the “life” of the people as they are life to us.

Moses is told to go to Mount Nebo, and that there he will see the Land of Promise and then he will die: *There on the mountain that you have climbed you will die and be gathered to your people, just as your brother Aaron died on Mount Hor and was gathered to his people.* (Deut. 32:50). Why was Moses not allowed to enter the land instead of just seeing it? The answer ids given by God as a reminder and a warning: *“This is because both of you broke faith with me in the presence of the Israelites at the waters of Meribah Kadesh in the Desert of Zin and because you did not uphold my holiness among the Israelites. Therefore, you will see the land only from a distance; you will not enter the land I am giving to the people of Israel.”* (Deut. 32:51-52). At Kadesh Moses was told to “speak to the rock” and instead he struck the rock (Num. 20:8). Why, we might ask, was this punishment so severe? The water was provided, and God got proper credit for it. But Moses partially obeyed God- which is the same as disobedience.

Luke1:1-23

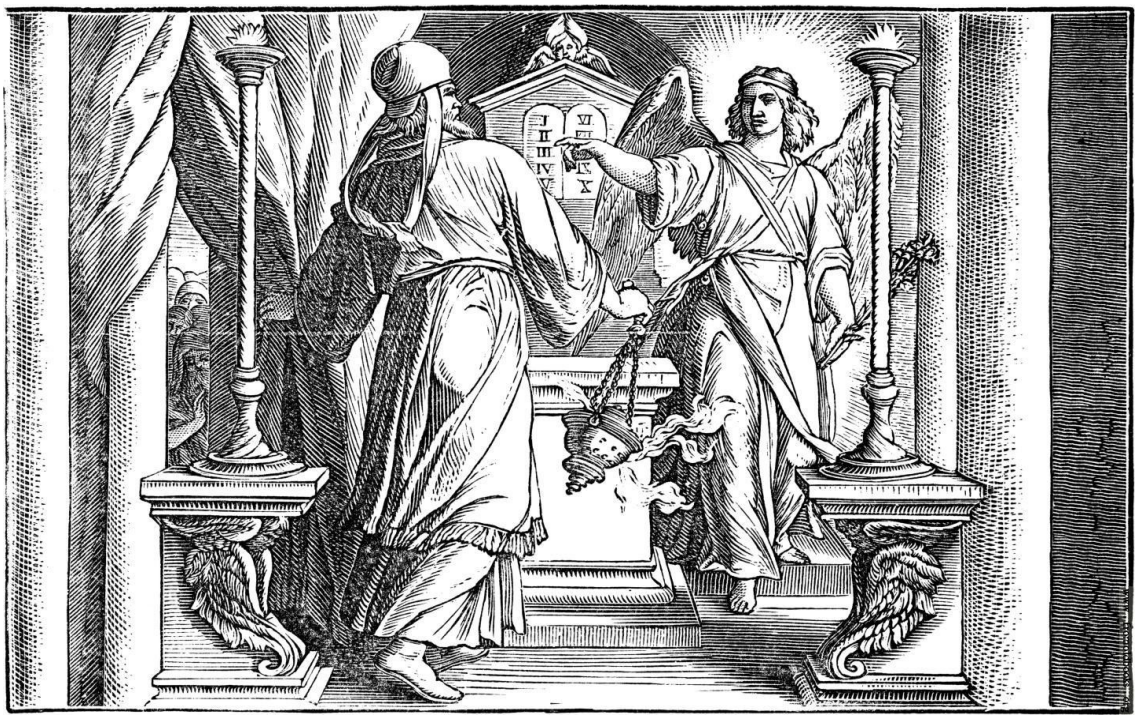
“Doctor” Luke has decide to record the wonderful story of Jesus for an interested friend, who is a “lover of God”- his name is “Theophilus” which literally means “God lover”. The Gentile Luke was called by Jesus to be a disciple, hinting at the diversity and issues the church would face as both religious and God loving Jews mixed with newly converted Gentiles. Luke’s intent is to write about what he has personally “carefully investigated” and produce an “orderly account” of this story for his friend (Luke 1:3). Luke also starts the preface to Acts in much the same way. This account is from “eyewitnesses” and involves much that has been “fulfilled” (Luke 1:1-2)

Luke then gives the account of Zechariah and his son John- who is to be the forerunner of Jesus. Jesus and John were cousins (Luke 1:34) through the fact that Mary and Elizabeth were cousins. (http://www.keyway.ca/htm2004/20041022.htm). Zechariah was a Levite priest “who belonged to the priestly division of Abijah” (Luke 1:5) and his wife Elizabeth was also a “descendant of Aaron”. They were righteous (Luke 1:6) but childless because Elizabeth could not conceive (Luke 1:7) Once when Zechariah’s “division was on duty” he was chosen by lot to burn incense while worshippers prayed outside (Luke 1:9-10) This was an honor that was given to a priest only once in a lifetime (https://bible.org/seriespage/zechariah-luke-11-25-57-80).

Then an amazing thing happened! One of God’s “named angels”- Gabriel- spoke to Zechariah and told him some wonderful news. Elizabeth was to conceive and bear a son, and this son was to be named “John” (Luke 1:13). Gabriel goes on to say: *“He will be a joy and delight to you, and many will rejoice because of his birth, for he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He is never to take wine or other fermented drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit even before he is born. He will bring back many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. 17 And he will go on before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the parents to their*

children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous—to make ready a people prepared for the Lord." (Luke 1:14-17). John was to be a "lifetime Nazarite"- he was never to drink wine or cutting his hair (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nazirite). He was to be gifted with the Holy Spirit- even before birth. Zechariah was skeptical and said to Gabriel: "How can I be sure of this? I am an old man and my wife is well along in years." (Luke 1:18b). This is certainly a parallel to Abram, who was also (as was Sarai) beyond normal childbearing age and these two were also visited by angels. (Gen. 18:10). God used these miracles to glorify Himself…it was His plan for the redemption of the world to give Abram a child who was to become a nation, and John to bear witness to Jesus.

Because of Zechariah's unbelief, the angel told him he would: *"be silent and not able to speak until the day this happens, because you did not believe my words, which will come true at their appointed time."* (Luke 1:20) The people waiting on Zechariah wondered "why he stayed so long in the temple." (Luke 1:21b). *"When he came out, he could not speak to them. They realized he had seen a vision in the temple, for he kept making signs to them but remained unable to speak. When his time of service was completed, he returned home."* (Luke 1:22-23). Silenced and awed, Zechariah could only wait until this wonderful birth took place.



Deuteronomy 33-34 March 19, 2014 Luke 1:24-56

So before he dies, Moses pronounced a blessing on the people. He was sure to have felt a mixture of pride, sorrow, regret and triumph- he had done what God had asked him to do. Despite his reluctant acceptance of God's call, the time had come for him to pass the mantle of leadership to another- also called and selected by God. His word were:

"The Lord came from Sinai
and dawned over them from Seir;
he shone forth from Mount Paran.

He came with[a] myriads of holy ones
from the south, from his mountain slopes.
Surely it is you who love the people;
all the holy ones are in your hand.
At your feet they all bow down,
and from you receive instruction,
the law that Moses gave us,
the possession of the assembly of Jacob.
He was king over Jeshurun
when the leaders of the people assembled,
along with the tribes of Israel.
(Deut. 33:2b-5)
Moses goes on and blesses each tribe by name: Reuben, Judah, Levi, Benjamin, Joseph, Zebulon, Dan, Naptali, Asher, and Jeshuron. He gives each a prophesy and a blessing as they are about to inhabit the Promised Land.

Finally Moses blesses all of Israel:
So Israel will live in safety;
Jacob will dwell secure
in a land of grain and new wine,
where the heavens drop dew.
Blessed are you, Israel!
Who is like you,
a people saved by the Lord?
He is your shield and helper
and your glorious sword.
Your enemies will cower before you,
and you will tread on their heights."
(Deut. 33:28-29). The safety and security of Israel was promised by God- indeed, His people persist today- in their own land!

The time has come for Moses to be gathered to his people- and he dies in Moab after seeing the Promised Land from Mount Nebo. (Deut. 34:1-5). When Moses dies he was still in remarkable physical shape, though he was 12 years old: *"Moses was a hundred and twenty years old when he died, yet his eyes were not weak nor his strength gone."* (Deut. 34:7) God had kept him strong and his eyes keen so he could be a strong and effective leader of his people!

God had a worthy successor to Moses- Joshua son of Nun. Joshua was: *"filled with the spirit of wisdom because Moses had laid his hands on him."* (Deut. 34:9b). I believe the "Spirit of wisdom" was also the Holy Spirit- since it came from another annointed with God's Holy Spirit, Moses.

The a tribute is given to Moses: *Since then, no prophet has risen in Israel like Moses, whom the Lord knew face to face, who did all those signs and wonders the Lord sent him to do in Egypt—to Pharaoh and to all his officials and to his whole land. For no one has ever shown the mighty power or performed the awesome deeds that Moses did in the sight of all Israel.* (Deut. 34:10-12). Moses was indeed God's man for the moment- he was known by the Lord “face to face”- in an intimate and ongoing way- a harbinger of the Son of Man who also knew and communicated with God the Father intimately and often.

Luke 1:24-56

Another miraculous birth! Just as Sarai had become pregnant in her later years, Elizabeth conceived a son. Elizabeth was in isolation, and gave thanks and praise to God for this wonderful act of mercy *“The Lord has done this for me,” she said. “In these days he has shown his favor and taken away my disgrace among the people.”*(Like 1:25).

The the angel Gabriel (a “named angle” visited Elizabeth's cousin Mary. Mary was likely a young girl- some estimate she was no more than 16-17. God had seen in her the spirit of servanthood and obedience, and the willingness to participate in still another miraculous birth. Gabriel's greeting was puzzling and troublesome to her at first: “Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you.” (Luke 1:28). Mary hardly knew what to think. What did this mean? Had God selected her for some yet unknown purpose?

Then, as angels often said, these words of reassurance came *”“Do not be afraid, Mary; you have found favor with God. 31 You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you are to call him Jesus. 32 He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, 33 and he will reign over Jacob’s descendants forever; his kingdom will never end.”* (Luke 1:30b-33) What could this mean? A king on the throne of David? My child?

Mary naturally wondered, as I am sure we would, how this could be true. She answered: *“How will this be,” Mary asked the angel, “since I am a virgin?”* (Luke 1:34). The answer was as puzzling as the one she was just given: *“The Holy Spirit will come on you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God. Even Elizabeth your relative is going to have a child in her old age, and she who was said to be unable to conceive is in her sixth month. For no word from God will ever fail.”* (Luke 1:35b-37). How would she be overcome? How could this little one be the very Son of God? What's this about God's word never failing?

Her answer was a model of surrender, devotion and obedience: *“I am the Lord’s servant,” Mary answered. “May your word to me be fulfilled.” Then the angel left her.* (Luke 1:38) Could we answer with such trust and obedience? Was God delighted with His choice? I think He must have been filled with gladness at the love and devotion that this young girl had for her God whom she loved. Despite the disgrace that she might face, despite the troubling questions from her soon to be husband, she was willing to be God's servant!

Mary then visited her cousin Elizabeth, and the moment Mary greeted Elizabeth a wonderful confirmation was given to both of these godly women: “When Elizabeth heard Mary’s greeting, the baby leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit.” (Luke 1:41). And Elizabeth's words thereafter show how delighted she is in what God had done for both of them:

“Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child you will bear! But why am I so favored, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? As soon as the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy. Blessed is she who has believed that the Lord would fulfill his promises to her!” (Luke 1:42b-45)

Then Mary sings a “song of delight” called by theologians the Magnificat:

“My soul glorifies the Lord
and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,
for he has been mindful
of the humble state of his servant.
From now on all generations will call me blessed,
for the Mighty One has done great things for me—
holy is his name.
His mercy extends to those who fear him,
from generation to generation.
He has performed mighty deeds with his arm;
he has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts.
He has brought down rulers from their thrones
but has lifted up the humble.
He has filled the hungry with good things
but has sent the rich away empty.
He has helped his servant Israel,
remembering to be merciful
to Abraham and his descendants forever,
just as he promised our ancestors.” (Luke 1:46b-55).

Mary then stayed with Elizabeth for “about three months” and then returned home (Luke 1:56)

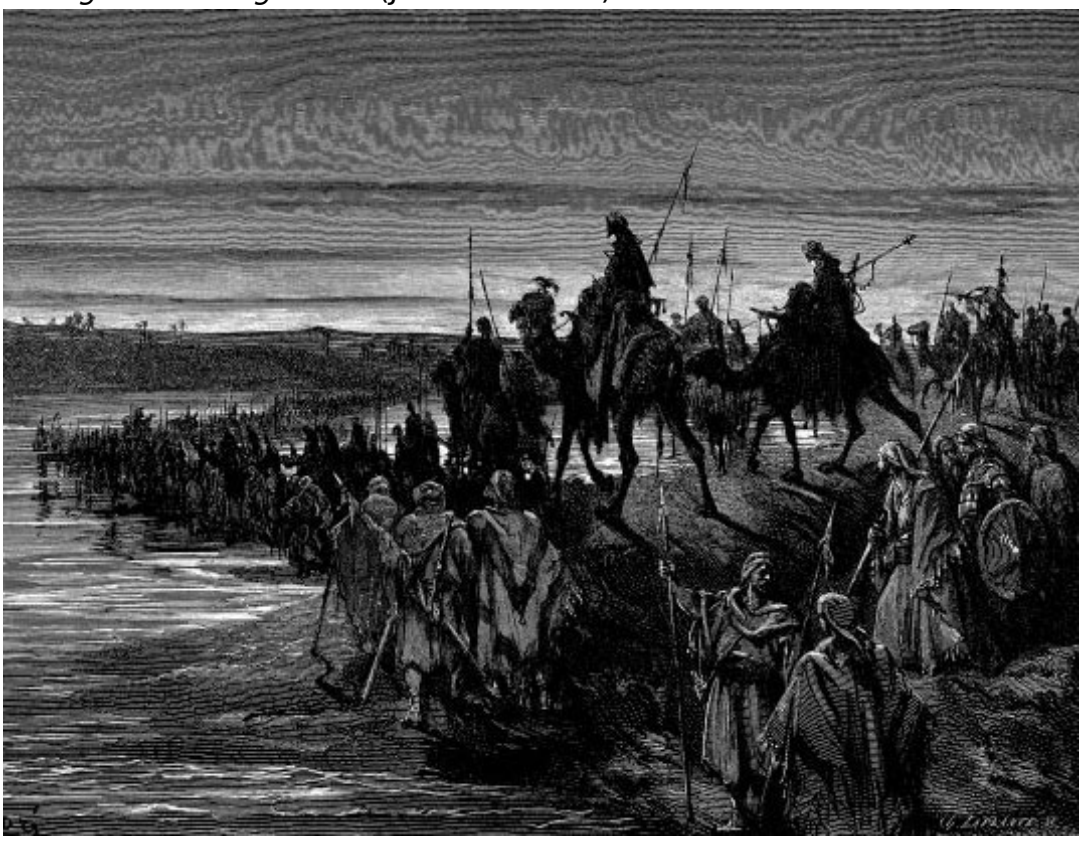
Joshua 1-3 March 20, 2014 Luke 1:57-80

Crossing the Jordan- not just a shift in geography but a bold step forward for God's people. Joshua was anointed by God as Moses' successor- and Joshua was to go where Moses was forbidden to go- into the Promised Land. Much would be required of Joshua- energy, foresight, careful planning and focused leadership. God promised, as He did so often, to be with Joshua: *"As I was with Moses, so I will be with you; I will never leave you nor forsake you. 6 Be strong and courageous, because you will lead these people to inherit the land I swore to their ancestors to give them."* (Josh. 1:5b-6) God promised Joshua that if he was always focused on and committed to obedience to God's Law, then he and the people would flourish: *"Be careful to obey all the law my servant Moses gave you; do not turn from it to the right or to the left, that you may be successful wherever you go. Keep this Book of the Law always on your lips; meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do everything written in it. Then you will be prosperous and successful."* (Josh. 1:7b-8)

Joshua wastes no time in getting the people ready to move into the new land. He tells the officers to go through the camps and get everything ready to move "in three days" (Josh. 1:11). The officer remind the people that this is the land that the Lord "is giving you for your own". The soldiers in the *"Reubenites, the Gadites and the half-tribe of Manasseh"* (Josh. 1:12) were to lead the people across, and were to return after the conquest to their promised part of the new land east of the Jordan river. The "fighting men" were to go, and the wives and children were to stay behind to be rejoined later by their "soldiers". These Transjordan tribes had "had very large herds and flocks" (Numbers 32: 1) and the land east of the Jordan was more suitable for grazing and tending the herds.

The power and effectiveness of Joshua's leadership is mirrored in these words of response: *"Whatever you have commanded us we will do, and wherever you send*

us we will go. Just as we fully obeyed Moses, so we will obey you. Only may the Lord your God be with you as he was with Moses. Whoever rebels against your word and does not obey it, whatever you may command them, will be put to death. Only be strong and courageous!" (Josh. 1:16b-18)



"The Children of Israel Crossing the Jordan" by Gustave Dore

So the two spies were sent by Joshua to "look over the land" and "especially Jericho" (Josh. 2:1). Jericho was a walled city, and overcoming the defensive walls could prove to be a major task! The spies stayed with a prostitute named Rahab (Josh 2:1). Military intelligence is certainly not new, since the king of Jericho apparently found out about the two spies, and even had a good idea where they were. The king demanded of Rahab: *"Bring out the men who came to you and entered your house, because they have come to spy out the whole land."* (Josh. 2:3) Rahab had hidden them on the roof´ "under the stalks of flax" (Josh. 2:6) and they eluded capture. She gave them directions to "go to the hills" to avoid capture, on the promise that they would spare her and her family. They agreed, and Rahab was to lower a "scarlet cord in the window" to mark her residence so that all within that dwelling would be spared. This is thought to be the source of the term "red light district" (see http://www.sermonnotebook.org/joshua/Joshua%2003%20-%20Joshua_2_8-21.htm).

The spies faithfully promised to spare Rahab and her family "As for those who are in the house with you, their blood will be on our head if a hand is laid on them." (Josh. 2:19). The spies were encouraged by Rahab's report of the low morale and fear that pervaded Jericho : *"I know that the Lord has given you this land and that a great fear of you has fallen on us, so that all who live in this country are melting in*

fear because of you. We have heard how the Lord dried up the water of the Red Sea[a] for you when you came out of Egypt, and what you did to Sihon and Og, the two kings of the Amorites east of the Jordan, whom you completely destroyed. When we heard of it, our hearts melted in fear and everyone's courage failed because of you, for the Lord your God is God in heaven above and on the earth below." (Josh. 2:9b-11). It is also worthy to note that God's plan for His earthly Son included this very unlikely ancestor, Rahab. Also included in Jesus' earthly ancestry was the Moabitess, Ruth. God has always used "unlikely" and sometimes unwilling persons to carry out His plans on the earth!

Then Joshua started the crossing of the Jordan "early in the morning" (Josh. 3:1). The orders given by the officers were very clear: *"When you see the ark of the covenant of the Lord your God, and the Levitical priests carrying it, you are to move out from your positions and follow it. Then you will know which way to go, since you have never been this way before. But keep a distance of about two thousand cubits between you and the ark; do not go near it."* (Josh. 3:3b-4) As we will see later, it was very unwise to approach the ark too closely! Then a wonderful promise is given to the people: *"Consecrate yourselves, for tomorrow the Lord will do amazing things among you."* (Josh. 3:5b) Truly "amazing" things were indeed in store for God's people! Just as Moses had parted the waters of the Red/Reed Sea, the priests when entering the Jordan saw that: *"the water from upstream stopped flowing. It piled up in a heap a great distance away, at a town called Adam in the vicinity of Zarethan, while the water flowing down to the Sea of the Arabah (that is, the Dead Sea) was completely cut off. So the people crossed over opposite Jericho. The priests who carried the ark of the covenant of the Lord stopped in the middle of the Jordan and stood on dry ground, while all Israel passed by until the whole nation had completed the crossing on dry ground."* (Josh. 3:16-17) This happened despite the fact that the water was "at flood stage" during the harvest time (Josh. 3:15). How could anyone present not remember this great demonstration of God's power. The people were sure to take heart at this, and become even more determined to conquer the obstacles before them in taking and occupying the "city fortress" of Jericho. Yes, God had another amazing plan waithing for them there as well!

Luke 1:57-80

Zechariah can speak! After writing down the name that his son was to be named, the Lord "his mouth was opened" (Luke 1:64). This was in agreement with what Gabriel had told Zechariah (Luke 1:13). When the suggestion was made to Elizabeth that the child be named Zechariah- after his father- Elizabeth said *"No! He is to be called John."* (Luke 1:60b). It is a tribute to the clarity and wonder of God's provision of John to this faithful couple, that many knowing about these events said *"What then is this child going to be?" For the Lord's hand was with him."* (Luke 1:66).

When God does a miracle, one of the main reasons is to call attention to His majesty and glory, and to cause people to notice His presence, personality, and character. God did a miracle here, and we can see the depth and love in Zechariah's heart as reflected in this beautiful and poetic testimony:

“Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel,
because he has come to his people and redeemed them.
He has raised up a horn of salvation for us
in the house of his servant David
(as he said through his holy prophets of long ago),
salvation from our enemies
and from the hand of all who hate us—
to show mercy to our ancestors
and to remember his holy covenant,
the oath he swore to our father Abraham:
to rescue us from the hand of our enemies,
and to enable us to serve him without fear
in holiness and righteousness before him all our days.
And you, my child, will be called a prophet of the Most High;
for you will go on before the Lord to prepare the way for him,
to give his people the knowledge of salvation
through the forgiveness of their sins,
because of the tender mercy of our God,
by which the rising sun will come to us from heaven
to shine on those living in darkness
and in the shadow of death,
to guide our feet into the path of peace.” (Luke 1:68-79)

And John grew and matured *“the child grew and became strong in spirit; and he lived in the wilderness until he appeared publicly to Israel.”* (Luke 1:80). This is a clear parallel to Jesus’ growing and maturing: *“the child (Jesus) grew and became strong; he was filled with wisdom, and the grace of God was on him.”* (Luke 2:40b). Both of these cousins were “miracle children”, both were filled with God’s grace and power, both were strengthened by the wilderness- John by taking it as his place of business- Jesus by His temptation during which He clearly defined His earthly mission.

Joshua 4-6 March 21, 2014 Luke 2:1-24

Twelve men- one for each tribe- twelve “marker stones”. These were used to create a “bookmark”, a reminder, of God’s provision and grace. Some call this an “Ebenezer” (1 Sam. 7:12). This is a permanent reminder: *“Go over before the ark of the Lord your God into the middle of the Jordan. Each of you is to take up a stone on his shoulder, according to the number of the tribes of the Israelites, to serve as a sign among you. In the future, when your children ask you, ‘What do these stones mean?’ tell them that the flow of the Jordan was cut off before the ark of the covenant of the Lord. When it crossed the Jordan, the waters of the Jordan were cut off. These stones are to be a memorial to the people of Israel forever.”* (Josh. 4:5b-7). Whe my home church built a prayer chapel, we had a ceremony in which smooth river stones were marked by permanent marker and placed in the foundation- these were marked with prayers, Scripture verses, “resolutions”, or other meaningful items- and served as part of the permanent foundation of the chapel. Although

these were not visible like the twelve marker stones in Joshua 4, they are a constant reminder that the chapel was built on the “prayers of the people”.
The people did as Joshua commanded- they took stones from the middle of the river bed- and constructed a monument to God’s provision and a reminder of His grace and protection. And the Scripture states “they are here to this day” (Josh. 4:9).

Forty thousand men- the warriors of the tribes of Reuben, Gad and the half tribe of Manasseh crossed over “in front of the Israelites” (Josh. 4:12). And the Lord showed His favor on Joshua and his leadership: *“That day the LORD exalted Joshua in the sight of all Israel; and they stood in awe of him all the days of his life, just as they had stood in awe of Moses.”* (Josh. 4:14). The Joshua commanded the priests bearing the ark to “Come up out of the Jordan” (Josh. 4:17). And no sooner had they *“set their feet on the dry ground than the waters of the Jordan returned to their place and ran at flood stage as before.”* (Josh. 4:18) The people needed a clear sign from God before they undertook this campaign of occupation, and God graciously provided it!

Then the people “camped at Gilgal” (Josh. 4:19) at the eastern border of Jericho. This is where the twelve stones from the Jordan were set up. And Joshua reminded them as to the “why” of this marker: *“He did this so that all the peoples of the earth might know that the hand of the Lord is powerful and so that you might always fear the Lord your God.”* (Josh. 4:24)
The news of this miracle accomplished other purposes as well- *“when all the Amorite kings west of the Jordan and all the Canaanite kings along the coast heard how the Lord had dried up the Jordan before the Israelites until they[c] had crossed over, their hearts melted in fear and they no longer had the courage to face the Israelites.”* (Josh. 5:1)

Since those who had been born “in the wilderness” during the 40 years of wandering had not been circumcised, Joshua had the people make preparations for circumcision. After all the circumcisions took place “they remained where they were in camp until they were healed.” (Josh. 5:8). Then the Passover was celebrated- again, a “preparatory event” like the Passover which came to be known as the Last Supper. And God told Joshua Then the LORD spoke to Joshua, *“Today I have rolled away the reproach of Egypt from you.” So the place has been called Gilgal to this day.”* (Josh. 5:9) As a footnote, “Gilgal” sounds like the Hebrew for “roll.”
They marked the Passover meal by eating of the produce of the new Land- another transition that God was guiding His people through: “*The day after the Passover, that very day, they ate some of the produce of the land: unleavened bread and roasted grain. The manna stopped the day after they ate this food from the land; there was no longer any manna for the Israelites, but that year they ate the produce of Canaan.* (Josh. 5:11b-12) The manna stopped- it was no longer needed. But when God ceased one supply, He gave another- just as He always does!

As Joshua is preparing to take Jericho, he sees a startling sight! “…he looked up and saw a man standing in front of him with a drawn sword in his hand.” (Josh. 5:13). His immediate reaction was “Who is this- and what side is he on?” Joshua asks *“Are you for us or for our enemies?”*. The answer is forthcoming *“Neither, but as commander of the army of the LORD I have now come.”* (Josh 5:14). We should be

careful that we never claim that God is on our side- we should be on God's "side"! Yet the angel who appeared explained why he had been sent, not just as a messenger but as an inspiration and a giver of strength and resolve: 15 The commander of the Lord's army replied*, "Take off your sandals, for the place where you are standing is holy." And Joshua did so."* (Josh. 5:15) The ground was holy because it was to be set apart for God- and God would reveal the plan- His plan- for conquering the people and city of Jericho. The plan was incredible- yet came straight from God: *"See, I have delivered Jericho into your hands, along with its king and its fighting men. March around the city once with all the armed men. Do this for six days. Have seven priests carry trumpets of rams' horns in front of the ark. On the seventh day, march around the city seven times, with the priests blowing the trumpets. When you hear them sound a long blast on the trumpets, have the whole army give a loud shout; then the wall of the city will collapse and the army will go up, everyone straight in."* (Josh. 6:2b-5) How would this be possible? Modern science has tried to 'explain" away the miracle that was to take place, even suggesting that the acoustics of the ram "horns" blowing would cause sympathetic vibrations and cause the walls to collapse (http://www.squidoo.com/walls-of-jericho) or that the collapse was the result of an earthquake, although earthquakes are not typically so "selective" in their destruction (http://www.christiananswers.net/q-abr/abr-a011.html). Certainly the God of the universe knows all the physical laws He created! However the "scientific" explanation might go, the ultimate answer is that God- somehow- caused the collapse!

The barriers to taking the city were certainly real. As the Scripture states: *"Now the gates of Jericho were securely barred because of the Israelites. No one went out and no one came in."*
So the people followed God's directions- the city was circled seven times, and the seventh time they gave a great shout and blew the ram horns (shofars) and di as they were ordered. Joshua said to them: *"Shout! For the LORD has given you the city! The city and all that is in it are to be devoted to the LORD. Only Rahab the prostitute and all who are with her in her house shall be spared, because she hid the spies we sent."* (Josh. 6:16-17) And the walls- seemingly mighty and impenetrable- *"collapsed; so everyone charged straight in, and they took the city."* (Josh. 6:20). Joshua then told the two spies to: *"Go into the prostitute's house and bring her out and all who belong to her, in accordance with your oath to her."* (Josh. 6:22b). Except for sparing Rahab and her family, the destruction of the city was complete: "Then they burned the whole city and everything in it, but they put the silver and gold and the articles of bronze and iron into the treasury of the Lord's house." (Josh. 6:24). And Joshua forbid anyone to rebuild the city at the cost of their "firstborn son":

"At the cost of his firstborn son
he will lay its foundations;
at the cost of his youngest
he will set up its gates." (Josh. 6:26b).

And the people were victorious, and the first step of reclaiming the Promised Land had begun. And, as the Scripture reports: *"So the Lord was with Joshua, and his fame spread throughout the land."* (Josh 6:27)

Luke 2:1-24

"And in those days…" so many family Christmas gatherings included reading from Luke 2. I remember especially a gathering at my Grandmothers' where not one but three accordions" entertained" the family- myself, my middle brother Jonathan, and my cousin Tim all "played" Christmas carols and other delights. It was so awful that even Lawrence Welk considered abolishing the accordion from his band! Yet the Scripture was so simple, the story so powerful and engaging, that this wonderful Story took center stage. I wondered as a child if Jesus was "cold in the manger".

The census was taken- either for enumeration or taxation- now as then! As the KJV translation states: "And it came to pass in those days, that there went out a decree from Caesar Augustus, that all the world should be *taxed*." (Luke 2:1 KJV- italics mine) Other translations suggest that the purpose was to take a census, but I am suspicious that the purpose of the census was to establish a tax base for the Roman empire. There is controversy about this verse among Bible scholars and historians (http://smoodock45.wordpress.com/2010/12/19/the-world-census-of-caesar-augustus/)
Regardless "everyone went to their own town to register" (Luke 2:3)- including Mary and Joseph- betrothed to be married. And "While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born." (Luke 2:7b). her son was born in what was probably a cave- the rooms for rent in their home town were all taken! There were shepherds nearby- performing the job "nobody really wanted" They were up late at night, sleeping in shifts, watching over sheep or other animals to protect them from wild animals or other threats such as thievery. The angels appeared to them (an unlikely recipient!) and promptly had to calm them down- many angelic appearances were at least initially terrifying. They said: *"Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger."* (Luke 2:10b-12) Then the penultimate "angel experience" was suddenly before these shepherds, as the heavens opened and angels proclaimed:
"Glory to God in the highest heaven,
and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests." (Luke 2:14)
As a child I remembered hearing the KJV which states that peace is to be "to men". Ignoring the sexist "men" and mentally substituting "all", the message is still different. God's peace truly rests only where it is welcomed- and those on whose God's favor rests are those who would embrace and receive God's peace- not "all persons" but only "some persons"!

Naturally the shepherds wanted to see what this angelic chorus was about, so they left and went to the place they had been told they would find this remarkable child. Maybe they knew who the messiah was to be, maybe they were simply curious- but they were drawn to the place where He was! They said to each other: *"Let's go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about."*

(Luke 2:15b). When they saw the baby, just as the angels had described Him, *"they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child, and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them."* (Luke 2:17b-18) Evangelism is, after all, just "telling the story" of what God has done in your life. The shepherds here were natural evangelists- they couldn't help themselves and many were "amazed". And part of their natural reaction was "glorifying and praising God" (Luke 2:20).

The time came for Jesus to be presented to the priests at the Temple in Jerusalem, as "required by the Law of Moses" (Luke 2:22). He was the "firstborn" and a sacrifice was to be made as part of His dedication. For those not wealthy enough to sacrifice a lamb. The Law prescribed "a pair of doves or two young pigeons." (Luke 2:24; Lev 12:8)

Angels Appear to the Shepherds in the Field 1656 (oil on canvas), Berchem, Nicolaes Pietersz. (1620-83)

Joshua 7-8 March 22, 2014 Luke 2:25-52

The "spoils of war"- so easy to take- maybe to hide and keep. Yet God had told His people to be faithful with "devoted things"- things to be dedicated and used only by God and the priestly order. Achan took some of them and God's anger "burned against Israel" (Josh. 7:1). The result and consequence of this anger was a resounding defeat of the Israeli army at Ai. The spies had told Joshua that only a few thousand men would be needed to defeat the enemy, but the army was defeated: "*So about three thousand went up; but they were routed by the men of Ai, 5 who killed about thirty-six of them. They chased the Israelites from the city gate as far as the stone quarries and struck them down on the slopes. At this the hearts of the people melted in fear and became like water."* (Josh. 7:4b-5). Joshua

knew something was wrong, so he “tore his clothes and fell facedown to the ground before the ark of the Lord” to show his sorrow and repentance. The Lord then intervened and said to Joshua : *“Stand up! What are you doing down on your face? Israel has sinned; they have violated my covenant, which I commanded them to keep. They have taken some of the devoted things; they have stolen, they have lied, they have put them with their own possessions. That is why the Israelites cannot stand against their enemies; they turn their backs and run because they have been made liable to destruction. I will not be with you anymore unless you destroy whatever among you is devoted to destruction.”* (Josh. 7:10b-12). The requirement for victory is that God’s instructions be completely obeyed- the offender must be located and “destroyed”. Joshua then told the army to consecrate themselves (consecration is defined as “solemn dedication to a specific purpose”) (Josh. 7:13).

Then the people were to present themselves “tribe by tribe” (Josh. 7:14). Then *“The tribe the Lord chooses shall come forward clan by clan; the clan the Lord chooses shall come forward family by family; and the family the Lord chooses shall come forward man by man. 15 Whoever is caught with the devoted things shall be destroyed by fire, along with all that belongs to him. He has violated the covenant of the Lord and has done an outrageous thing in Israel!’”* (Josh. 7:14b-15) So the offender was to be located by winnowing down from tribe to clan, to family, and finally, to the individual. The sequence that occurred was 1) the tribe of Judah was selected (by God); 2) the clan of Zerahites; 3) the family of Zimri, and finally 4) Achan son of Karmi. Joshua ordered Achan to confess : *“My son, give glory to the LORD, the God of Israel, and honor him. Tell me what you have done; do not hide it from me.”* (Josh. 7:19b) Then, to his credit- or perhaps because he had no other option, Achan confessed: *“It is true! I have sinned against the LORD, the God of Israel. This is what I have done: When I saw in the plunder a beautiful robe from Babylonia, two hundred shekels of silver and a bar of gold weighing fifty shekels, I coveted them and took them. They are hidden in the ground inside my tent, with the silver underneath.”* (Josh. 7:20b-21) Notice that Achan “coveted”- breaking one of the commandments, and that which he coveted was to be dedicated to God. Then Joshua sent men to investigate, and the treasure was discovered just as described.

The penalty exacted was a harsh one: *“Then Joshua, together with all Israel, took Achan son of Zerah, the silver, the robe, the gold bar, his sons and daughters, his cattle, donkeys and sheep, his tent and all that he had, to the Valley of Achor. Joshua said, “Why have you brought this trouble on us? The Lord will bring trouble on you today.” Then all Israel stoned him, and after they had stoned the rest, they burned them. Over Achan they heaped up a large pile of rocks, which remains to this day. Then the Lord turned from his fierce anger.”* (Josh. 7:24b-26) Only after Achan’s whole family was killed, his tent and animals destroyed, was God’s anger satisfied. I personally have some difficulty, especially in light of the passage in Deuteronomy 24:16 “Fathers shall not be put to death because of their children, nor shall children be put to death because of their fathers. Each one shall be put to death for his own sin.” (ESV). The scripture speaks at various places on this issue (see http://www.openbible.info/topics/sins_of_the_father). For example, Deuteronomy 5:9 states “You shall not bow down to them or serve them; for I the Lord your God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children

to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me…" (ESV). Perhaps in this case, the fact that Achan "hated" God by deliberately defying His clear direction was reason enough to condemn the whole family- the person who "hated" God would presumably pass this disobedience to the children by teaching and example. NOTE: ESV is a relatively modern translation called the English Standard Version.

Regardless of the theology or reason, God then gave His blessing to the people and gave them victory over Ai. The strategy was one of ambush: *"Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged. Take the whole army with you, and go up and attack Ai. For I have delivered into your hands the king of Ai, his people, his city and his land. You shall do to Ai and its king as you did to Jericho and its king, except that you may carry off their plunder and livestock for yourselves. Set an ambush behind the city."* (Josh. 8:1b-2). Joshua led the army, and they separated into two forces- one to attack the city from the front and then to: *"flee from them. They will pursue us until we have lured them away from the city, for they will say, 'They are running away from us as they did before.' So when we flee from them, you are to rise up from ambush and take the city. The Lord your God will give it into your hand. When you have taken the city, set it on fire. Do what the Lord has commanded. See to it; you have my orders."* (Josh. 8:5b-8) The men of Ai would (foolishly) believe that the attacking force- the one they could see- had been defeated and was running away in fear. This was only to lure the men of Ai away from the city so that the second force could storm the city and burn it. Then the forces of Ai tried to return to the burning city but were caught between the Hebrew forces in the city and those behind them! The destruction- ordered by the Lord- was complete: *"When Israel had finished killing all the men of Ai in the fields and in the wilderness where they had chased them, and when every one of them had been put to the sword, all the Israelites returned to Ai and killed those who were in it. Twelve thousand men and women fell that day—all the people of Ai. For Joshua did not draw back the hand that held out his javelin until he had destroyed[g] all who lived in Ai."* (Josh. 8:24-26)

Joshua then killed the King of Ai who had been brought to him "alive", disgraced the King by impaling his body "on a pole" and turned the city into a pile of rubble and rocks: *"So Joshua burned Ai[h] and made it a permanent heap of ruins, a desolate place to this day. He impaled the body of the king of Ai on a pole and left it there until evening. At sunset, Joshua ordered them to take the body from the pole and throw it down at the entrance of the city gate. And they raised a large pile of rocks over it, which remains to this day."* (Josh. 8:28-29) Note that the word "Ai" in Hebrew means "ruin".

To solidify the dedication of the people and remind them of the central place of God in all their lives, Joshua built an altar at Mount Ebal, out of "uncut stones, on which no iron tool had been used." (Josh. 8:31). Joshua also wrote the "words of the Law" as it is written in the "Book of the Law" (Josh. 8:34). The Joshua read all the Law to the people, and *"There was not a word of all that Moses had commanded that Joshua did not read to the whole assembly of Israel, including the women and children, and the foreigners who lived among them."* (Josh. 8:35)

Luke 2:25-52

Simeon and Anna- two godly folks whom God had promised He would reveal His Messiah to (Simeon) and for whom he was the center of her life since she became a widow (Anna). Both were intimately familiar with God's Word- both of which were delighted to see this Child who had been brought for His dedication to the Lord.

Simeon took the Child in his arms and joyfully proclaimed:
"Sovereign Lord, as you have promised,
you may now dismiss your servant in peace.
For my eyes have seen your salvation,
which you have prepared in the sight of all nations:
a light for revelation to the Gentiles,
and the glory of your people Israel." (Luke 2:29-32).

Naturally, the parents *"marveled at what was said about Him"* (Luke 2:33) Simeon then blessed them and made a prophetic statement about Jesus: *"This child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be spoken against, so that the thoughts of many hearts will be revealed. And a sword will pierce your own soul too."* (Luke 2:34-35). I wonder if Mary remembered this prophesy when she witnessed her Son dying on the cross?

Anna, when coming up to them (the parents and Child), *"gave thanks to God and spoke about the child to all who were looking forward to the redemption of Jerusalem."* (Luke 2:38b). Then the Scripture records: *"When Joseph and Mary had done everything required by the Law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee to their own town of Nazareth. And the child grew and became strong; he was filled with wisdom, and the grace of God was on him."* (Luke 2:39-40).

The time came for Jesus to travel with His parents to the Temple in Jerusalem for the Passover celebration. Jesus was at the age when a boy is regarded as a man. A member of the Jewish community. In more modern times this is marked by a ceremony known as Bar Mitzvah. The literal translation of this term is "an agent subject to the Law"- so the child then becomes a man- subject to the Law. Then: *"After the festival was over, while his parents were returning home, the boy Jesus stayed behind in Jerusalem, but they were unaware of it. Thinking he was in their company, they traveled on for a day. Then they began looking for him among their relatives and friends. When they did not find him, they went back to Jerusalem to look for him. After three days they found him in the temple courts, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions."* (Luke 2:43b-46) Several things are difficult for a modern reader to understand in this passage: 1) Why didn't Jesus' parents know that he was "missing" right away? 2) What did Jesus do for the three days He was missing- did He take up temporary residence with the "teachers" in the Temple? 3) Why didn't the "teachers" try to let the parents know their child was among them? It is certainly worthy to note that *"Everyone who heard him was amazed at his understanding and his answers."* (Luke 2:47)

His parents were understandably upset- after all, Jesus was supposed to “honor his father and mother”! However, His priority at the time was to explore His understanding and mastery of God’s Word. To Jesus (and hopefully to us), the Word of God is life itself! So Jesus questions them: *“Why were you searching for me?” he asked. “Didn’t you know I had to be in my Father’s house?”* (Luke 2:49) And the Scripture reports that “they did not understand”. Neither would I have understood. Jesus returns to His parent, and to obedience and maturing. As the Scripture states: *“Then he went down to Nazareth with them and was obedient to them. But his mother treasured all these things in her heart. And Jesus grew in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and man.”* (Luke 2:51-52).

12 years old Jesus in the temple By Stavros Damos.

Joshua 9-10 March 23, 2014 Luke 3

Who wants to invite a disaster…or ask for trouble? Nobody! So the Gibeonites, having heard the fate of Ai and Jericho, resorted to deception. They “camouflaged’ themselves and made their traveling band look like they had traveled a very long while- implying that they were from far away. The truth was they were both nearby and terrified! Instead of the war proposed by the other “kings west of the Jordan” (Josh. 9:1), they preferred to seek a treaty of peace. The Scripture tells us: *“They went as a delegation whose donkeys were loaded[a] with worn-out sacks and old wineskins, cracked and mended. They put worn and patched sandals on their feet*

and wore old clothes. All the bread of their food supply was dry and moldy. Then they went to Joshua in the camp at Gilgal and said to him and the Israelites, "We have come from a distant country; make a treaty with us." (Josh. 9:4b-6). When asked "Where do you come from" (Josh. 9:8b), they lied and said "Your servants have come from a very distant country.." (Josh. 9:9b). So the Israelites took them at their word: *"The Israelites sampled their provisions but did not inquire of the Lord. Then Joshua made a treaty of peace with them to let them live, and the leaders of the assembly ratified it by oath."* (Josh. 9:14b-15). Notice that they looked only at the evidence at hand- false evidence it turned out- and did not "inquire of the Lord". The clear implication is that had they asked God they would have somehow learned the truth. Three days later the Hebrews learned the truth, but they had already sworn an oath not to harm them (Josh. 9:19). Since they could not kill them, they decided to make them *"woodcutters and water carriers in service of the whole assembly"* (Josh. 9:21). Joshua then summoned the Gibeonites and asked them : "Why did you deceive us by saying, *'We live a long way from you,' while actually you live near us? You are now under a curse: You will never be released from service as woodcutters and water carriers for the house of my God."* (Josh. 9:22b-23). The answer given is very telling: *"Your servants were clearly told how the Lord your God had commanded his servant Moses to give you the whole land and to wipe out all its inhabitants from before you. So we feared for our lives because of you, and that is why we did this. We are now in your hands. Do to us whatever seems good and right to you."* (Josh. 9:24b-25) The testimony they gave was that God was powerful- he had decided that the land was to belong to His chosen people, and the Gibeonites understandably did not want to be "wiped out"!

Then a spectacular miracle takes place. "The five kings of the Amorites—the kings of Jerusalem, Hebron, Jarmuth, Lachish and Eglon—joined forces." (Josh. 10:5). They planned to attack Gibeon- one of the fortified cities whose inhabitant had just made a treaty with the people of Israel. The Gibeonites cried out for help: *"Do not abandon your servants. Come up to us quickly and save us! Help us, because all the Amorite kings from the hill country have joined forces against us."* (Josh 10:6b). Joshua mustered his entire army, including his "best fighting men" (Josh. 10:7). Then *The LORD said to Joshua, "Do not be afraid of them; I have given them into your hand. Not one of them will be able to withstand you."* (Josh. 10:8). After an all night march, Joshua took the massed armies of the Amorites by surprise, and the slaughter was terrific! As we will see later in the story of Gideon, the Lord confused the enemies of His people: *The Lord threw them into confusion before Israel, so Joshua and the Israelites defeated them completely at Gibeon. Israel pursued them along the road going up to Beth Horon and cut them down all the way to Azekah and Makkedah. As they fled before Israel on the road down from Beth Horon to Azekah, the Lord hurled large hailstones down on them, and more of them died from the hail than were killed by the swords of the Israelites.* (Josh. 10:10-11). There was not enough left of the day to complete the destruction of the enemy forces, so Joshua said to the Lord:

"Sun, stand still over Gibeon,
and you, moon, over the Valley of Aijalon."
So the sun stood still,
and the moon stopped,
till the nation avenged itself on its enemies (Josh. 10:12b-13)

This poem/statement is recoded in the Book of Jasher, chapter 88. (http://www.sacred-texts.com/chr/apo/jasher/).

And the Scripture records a miracle: *"The sun stopped in the middle of the sky and delayed going down about a full day. There has never been a day like it before or since, a day when the Lord listened to a human being. Surely the Lord was fighting for Israel!"* (Josh. 10:13b-14).

The five kings of the Amorites had fled and hid "in the cave at Makkedah" (Josh 10:16). They were found, killed, and hung on "poles" and then buried in the cave by piling rocks on the entrance (Josh. 10:27) This hanging on poles is a disgrace to the person who is killed, according to Scripture (Deut. 21:23). The treatment of these five kings is an exclamation point on the complete victory of God over the enemies of His people. The battle was truly "the Lord's" (2 Chron. 20:15).

Joshua systematically conquered the cities to the south. As the Scripture summarizes:
So Joshua subdued the whole region, including the hill country, the Negev, the western foothills and the mountain slopes, together with all their kings. He left no survivors. He totally destroyed all who breathed, just as the Lord, the God of Israel, had commanded. Joshua subdued them from Kadesh Barnea to Gaza and from the whole region of Goshen to Gibeon. All these kings and their lands Joshua conquered in one campaign, because the Lord, the God of Israel, fought for Israel. (Josh. 10:40-42) Everywhere they fought, they "left no survivors" (Josh 10:28,30,33,37,39). The way was now cleared for God's people to securely occupy the Promised Land.

Luke 3
Isaiah proclaimed it, and John put the prophecy into fulfillment. He was truly the one who God had promised- the one who would make way and prepare for the

coming of God's Messiah. I love the Message translation here, which described John as '"stagehand": The main character in this drama, to whom I'm a mere stagehand, will ignite the kingdom life, a fire, the Holy Spirit within you, changing you from the inside out. He's going to clean house—make a clean sweep of your lives. (Luke 3:16-The Message). The prophet Isaiah had said:

"A voice of one calling in the wilderness,
'Prepare the way for the Lord,
   make straight paths for him.
Every valley shall be filled in,
   every mountain and hill made low.
The crooked roads shall become straight,
   the rough ways smooth.
 And all people will see God's salvation.'" (Luke 3:4b-6)

John never minced words of hid the plain truth. He called the people, including the "teachers of the law"- the good, respectable religious folks, a "brood of vipers" (Luke 3:7) John's message was simple- repent and bear fruit! (Luke 3:8-9). And the people hearing this, much like us, wanted some more detail. "What does this look like in my life….or how do I 'put legs' on this?".

John gave them examples- to the crowd: "Anyone who has two shirts should share with the one who has none, and anyone who has food should do the same." (Luke 3:11)- to the tax collectors (who were almost universally hated and who often took "extra"- "Don't collect any more than you are required to," (Luke 3:13)- to the soldiers (also not a popular group)- "Don't extort money and don't accuse people falsely—be content with your pay." (Luke 3:14b).

The people (naturally!) wondered if this John was the Messiah they had waited on. John made his role very clear to them: *"I baptize you with water. But one who is more powerful than I will come, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his barn, but he will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire."* (Luke 3:16b-17). The contrast was unmistakable- John's baptism was of repentance with water- the Messiah would baptize with the Holy Spirit- and He would bring judgment to the people.

Since John was so outspoken, it seemed inevitable he would come into conflict with someone in authority who did not receive John's message kindly. And such was the case with Herod, whose marriage to Herodias- Herod's sister in law "his brother's wife" (Luke 3:19). Herod had John locked up in prison (Luke 3:20).

The Jesus was baptized by John. This event is recoded in all the synoptic gospels (Matthew, Mark and Luke) and is indirectly referred to in John's gospel. Some have wondered why Jesus was baptized. Certainly it was not for repentance- He had no sin! Certainly not to be "confirmed" as one of God's people and a member of the body. Most scholars believe it was out of obedience to the Father, and as a witness and testimony to those around Him. Several of the gospel writers include hearing of a voice from heaven. Matthew records the voice from heaven as heard by many, Luke and Mark state the voice was heard by Jesus (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Baptism_of_Jesus) . In Luke's gospel the voice is

recorded as follows: “You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased.” (Luke 3:22). It is not entirely clear if Jesus Himself was the only one hearing the voice, or that others might have heard it.

We then see one of the genealogies of Jesus. Jesus was *”the son, so it was thought, of Joseph”* (Luke 3:23) and on the list goes. The inclusion of Boaz (Luke 3:32) is significant, since his wife was Ruth, a Moabite. The list in Matthew and Luke are essentially identical from Abraham through David, but differ afterwards (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Genealogy_of_Jesus). One theory is that Matthew’s genealogy is that of Joseph, and Luke’s that of Mary. However, the Scripture states (Luke 3:23) that the line of descent is that of Joseph! This is probably another of the many questions I would like to have answered by God Himself in heaven.

Joshua 11-13 March 24, 2014 Luke 4:1-32

And now Joshua’s attention turns to the Northern Kings- to *“Jabin king of Hazor, Jobab king of Madon, the kings of Shimron and Akshaph, and to the northern kings who were in the mountains, in the Arabah south of Kinnereth, in the western foothills and in Naphoth Dor on the west; to the Canaanites in the east and west; to the Amorites, Hittites, Perizzites and Jebusites in the hill country; and to the Hivites below Hermon in the region of Mizpah.”* (Josh. 11:1-3) They joined together and made a massive army “at the Waters of Merom” to fight against Joshua (Josh. 11:5). The Lord said to Joshua: *“Do not be afraid of them, because by this time tomorrow I will hand all of them, slain, over to Israel. You are to hamstring their horses and burn their chariots.”* (Josh. 11:6b). Joshua then “came against them suddenly at the Waters of Merom and attacked them” (Josh 11:7), and the Lord gave them great victory. They completely defeated them, hamstrung the horses and burned the chariots, as God had told them. The chariot in ancient times gave an army a great advantage, particularly on fairly level surface. It was almost the equivalent of a modern tank. (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chariot; http://historymatters.appstate.edu/sites/historymatters.appstate.edu/files/egyptchariots_000.pdf) With this battle won, Joshua then “captured Hazor and put its king to the sword. (Hazor had been the head of all these kingdoms.)” (Josh. 11:10). They completely destroyed all the soldiers as well as the rest of the populace, and burned the city of Hazor to the ground. The basic pattern was to kill all the inhabitants, and to take the livestock and plunder: “The Israelites carried off for themselves all the plunder and livestock of these cities, but all the people they put to the sword until they completely destroyed them, not sparing anyone that breathed.” (Josh. 11:14).

The conquest and subjugation of all these kings and their fortified cities was complete. God Himself was the source of this elimination, in order to rid Israel of the “snare” that these enemies would have posed. *“Joshua waged war against all these kings for a long time. Except for the Hivites living in Gibeon, not one city made a treaty of peace with the Israelites, who took them all in battle. For it was the Lord himself who hardened their hearts to wage war against Israel, so that he might destroy them totally, exterminating them without mercy, as the Lord had commanded Moses.”* (Josh. 11:18-20) The conquest was now complete, and God’s people could focus on living in the New land: *“So Joshua took the entire land, just as*

the Lord had directed Moses, and he gave it as an inheritance to Israel according to their tribal divisions. Then the land had rest from war." (Josh. 11:23)

Thirty one kings were taken, and they and their people destroyed in this total conflict. The list is given in its entirety in Joshua 12. The land became the land of Israel, divided as God had commanded, by tribes: *"Joshua gave their lands as an inheritance to the tribes of Israel according to their tribal divisions. The lands included the hill country, the western foothills, the Arabah, the mountain slopes, the wilderness and the Negev. These were the lands of the Hittites, Amorites, Canaanites, Perizzites, Hivites and Jebusites."* (Josh. 12:7b-8).

And just when Joshua thought that everything was accomplished, God informs him that the conquest is not complete: *"When Joshua had grown old, the Lord said to him, 'You are now very old, and there are still very large areas of land to be taken over.'"* (Josh. 13:1) I wonderf how Joshua must have felt at this revelation. His prime years had been spent waging war, conquering the peoples living in the Land, and now there was more? The truth was, Israel was, and is, surrounded by enemies. God describes the remaining land- yet to be conquered- to Joshua this way: *"This is the land that remains: all the regions of the Philistines and Geshurites, from the Shihor River on the east of Egypt to the territory of Ekron on the north, all of it counted as Canaanite though held by the five Philistine rulers in Gaza, Ashdod, Ashkelon, Gath and Ekron; the territory of the Avvites on the south; all the land of the Canaanites, from Arah of the Sidonians as far as Aphek and the border of the Amorites; the area of Byblos; and all Lebanon to the east, from Baal Gad below Mount Hermon to Lebo Hamath."* (Josh. 13:2-5)

God Himself promised to drive out some of the enemies of Israel: *"As for all the inhabitants of the mountain regions from Lebanon to Misrephoth Maim, that is, all the Sidonians, I myself will drive them out before the Israelites. Be sure to allocate this land to Israel for an inheritance, as I have instructed you, 7 and divide it as an inheritance among the nine tribes and half of the tribe of Manasseh."* (Josh. 13:6-7)

The rest of the conquered land, "East of the Jordan" was to be divided as God had already revealed. (Josh 13:8-31). And in summary, the Scripture says: *"This is the inheritance Moses had given when he was in the plains of Moab across the Jordan east of Jericho. 33 But to the tribe of Levi, Moses had given no inheritance; the Lord, the God of Israel, is their inheritance, as he promised them."* (Josh 13:32b-33)

Luke 4:1-32

Jesus was then led "by the Spirit into the wilderness" where he was "tempted by the Devil" for forty days and nights. (Luke 4:1-2) During this time Jesus prayed and fasted. Then Satan tried to test His focus, dedication to His calling and purpose, and total obedience to His Father in a series of questions. Jesus answered each question from Scripture, in this case all from Deuteronomy.

The Devil challenged Him (knowing full well how hungry he was): *"If you are the Son of God, tell this stone to become bread."*(Luke 4:3). Jesus answered from Scripture: *"It is written: 'Man shall not live on bread alone.'"* (Luke 4:4, quoting Deut. 8:3). The next challenge came- Satan led Jesus to a high place, and showed Him all the kingdoms of the world: *"I will give you all their authority and splendor; it has been given to me, and I can give it to anyone I want to. 7 If you worship me, it will all be yours."* (Luke 4:6b-7) And Jesus, answer was: 'Worship the Lord your God and serve him only.' (Luke 4:8, quoting Deut. 6:13). Then came the last challenge, as Satan led Him to the highest point of the Temple in Jerusalem and said: *"If you are the Son of God," he said, "throw yourself down from here. For it is written:*

"'He will command his angels concerning you
to guard you carefully;
11 *they will lift you up in their hands,*
so that you will not strike your foot against a stone.'" (Luke 4:9b-11, quoting Psalm 91:11-12). And Jesus answered: *"It is said: 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'"* (Luke 4:12, quoting Deut. 6:16), It is frightening to note that Satan knew the Scriptures as well- and will use the Scripture, or any tool, to discourage and demoralize believers. Notice that after this series of failed temptations, Satan did not "give up" but: "When the devil had finished all this tempting, he left him until an opportune time." (Luke 4:13). Some feel that next "opportune time" was in the Garden of Gethsemane. The point we must not miss is that if Satan did not give up on the Son of God Himself, he will certainly not give up on us!

Many scholars believe that it was at this point that Jesus began His earthly ministry. He went to Galilee in the "power of the Spirit" and *"news about him spread through the whole countryside. He was teaching in their synagogues, and everyone praised him."* (Luke 4:14b-15). It is no accident that when he or we are "in the power of the Spirit that amazing, wonderful and unexpected things happen! One Sabbath Jesus read from the Scripture:

"The Spirit of the Lord is on me,
because he has anointed me
to proclaim good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners
and recovery of sight for the blind,
to set the oppressed free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." (Luke 4:18-19, quoting Isaiah 61:1-2)

Then something truly remarkable happened. Jesus claimed in public that the one referred to in Isaiah's prophesy was Himself! He said: "Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing." (Luke 4:21b). Some were incredulous: *"Isn't this Joseph's son?"* (Luke 4:22b) Jesus knew that many would have a hard time accepting Him for who he was, especially in His home town. He evn told them: *"Surely you will quote this proverb to me: 'Physician, heal yourself!' And you will tell me, 'Do here in your hometown what we have heard that you did in Capernaum.'" "Truly I tell you," he continued, "no prophet is accepted in his hometown. I assure you that there were many widows in Israel in Elijah's time, when the sky was shut for three and a half*

years and there was a severe famine throughout the land. Yet Elijah was not sent to any of them, but to a widow in Zarephath in the region of Sidon. And there were many in Israel with leprosy[g] in the time of Elisha the prophet, yet not one of them was cleansed—only Naaman the Syrian." (Luke 4:23b-27) Capernaum was kind of the "base headquarters for Jesus' ministry, and He was to perform miracles there. Yet in places where the faith of the people was lacking, He did little except heal a few sick (which to me would be a sufficient miracle!) Jesus is scolding the people for their lack of faith. Hadn't God led them out of Egypt, given them the Promised Land, defeated their enemies, and established the throne of David. Hadn't He promised them a Messiah? Yet they still did not believe.

The people then became "furious" and *"They got up, drove him out of the town, and took him to the brow of the hill on which the town was built, in order to throw him off the cliff."* (Luke 4:28-29). They wanted to destroy this "heretic" and this self-proclaimed "Messiah" ! But Jesus was truly fearless, and full of the Spirit and confidence that comes from knowing God intimately, He *"walked right through the crowd and went on his way."* (Luke 4:30b) Did no one have the courage to lay a hand on Him? Was His presence so powerful that no person would stand against Him? Apparently not!

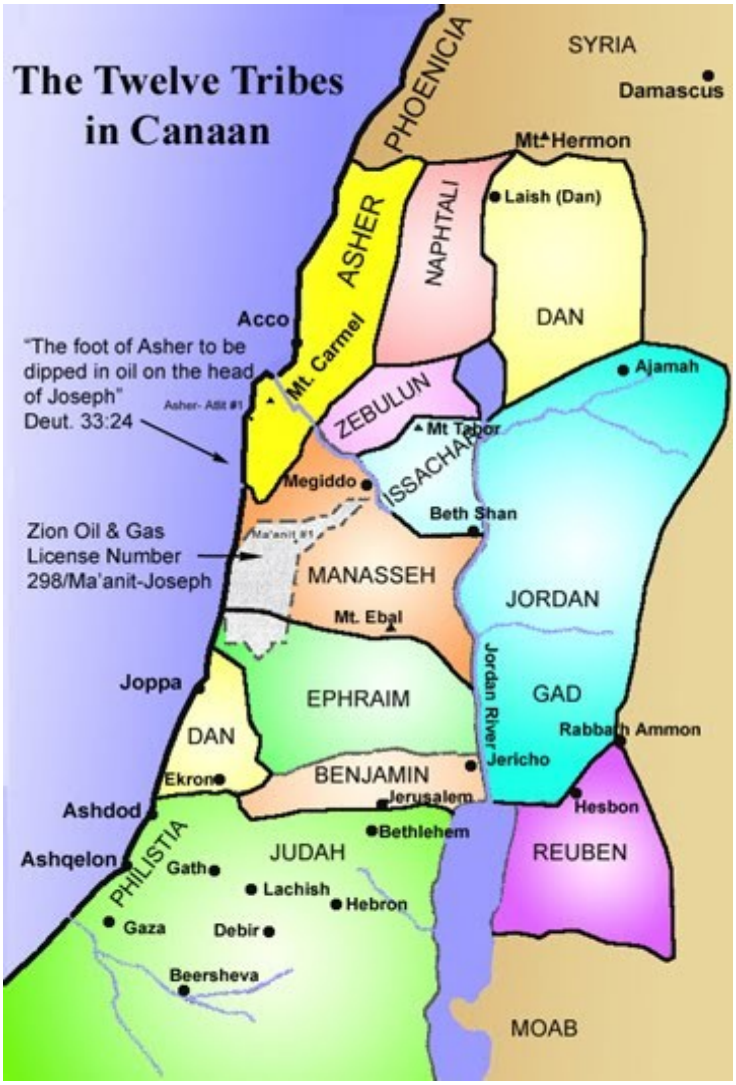
Then Jesus went to Capernaum (the headquarters) and taught the people. They were certainly more receptive than those in Nazareth, for: *"They were amazed at his teaching, because his words had authority."* (Luke 4:32)

Joshua 14-15 March 25, 2014 Luke 4:33-44

And so the land West of the Jordan was to be divided among the nine and one half tribes "by lot" (Josh. 14:2), and the tribe of Joseph had been split into two tribes- Manasseh and Ephraim (Josh. 14:4). The land was then divided as the Lord had "commanded Moses" (Josh. 14:5). Caleb was given Hebron as "his inheritance"- as a reward for his willingness to trust God when he spied on the Promised Land some

forty years earlier. The Scripture tells us: *"So Hebron has belonged to Caleb son of Jephunneh the Kenizzite ever since, because he followed the Lord, the God of Israel, wholeheartedly."* (Josh. 14:14). And also, finally, *"the land had rest from war."* (Josh. 14:15). It is certainly worthy to note that God remembered Caleb- that Caleb's faith and willingness to follow God led ultimately to Caleb's good- as it does for us!

And the Scripture then gives us a description of the boundaries of the tribe of Judah: "The allotment for the tribe of Judah, according to its clans, extended down to the territory of Edom, to the Desert of Zin in the extreme south." (Josh. 15:1). The southern boundary was from the Dear Sea to the Mediterranean Sea; the eastern boundary the Dead sea until it reaches the Jordan; the northern boundary ran from the mouth of the Jordan to "the sea" (Josh. 15:2-11). The clans in the tribe of Judah are also listed and given boundaries in Joshua 15:15-61). A comment about the Jebusites is given at the end of Joshua 15 which is an ominous one: *"Judah could not dislodge the Jebusites, who were living in Jerusalem; to this day the Jebusites live there with the people of Judah."* (Josh. 15:63) Judges 1:21 mentions the Jebusites, a Canaanite tribe that occupied Jerusalem before its conquest. Certainly the persistence of this Canaanite influence could not have been a positive part of the spiritual life of God's people.



Luke 4:33-44

Jesus went about doing good- healing and preaching! Here we have several examples of both. Jesus encountered a man "in the synagogue" who was possessed by a demon (Luke 4:33) And the demon knew Jesus, and carried out*: "Go away! What do you want with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are—the Holy One of God!"* (Luke 4:34) Jesus' response is very interesting: *"Be quiet!" Jesus said sternly. "Come out of him!"* (Luke 4:35) Later in this passage we see Jesus rebuking the demons, and forbidding them to speak out and identify Him. Some have theorized that this "identification" of Jesus as the Messiah would have been counterproductive to Jesus' ministry. He revealed Himself to very few- the closest disciples, the woman to the well, and finally to the high priests at his mock trial. Perhaps if "many" identified Him as Messiah, the expectations of the Messiah being an "earthly king" would be an obstacle to Jesus' ministry and teaching.

The news, however, certainly spread- and rapidly once this demonic deliverance was accomplished: *"What words these are! With authority and power he gives orders to impure spirits and they come out!" 37 And the news about him spread throughout the surrounding area."* (Luke 4:36b-37) Jesus then went to "the home of Simon" (Luke 4:38), where Simon's mother was found to be ill and with a fever. When asked, Jesus healed her, and then she "got up at once and began to wait on them." (Luke 4:39b). A modern reader might wonder if this is "sexist"- that the "place" of women is to be servants of men. This was, in my belief, certainly not the reason Jesus healed Simon's mother, although it is not regarded by the gospel writer as unusual that she did wait on the guests.

The later, at "sunset" many sick people were brought to Jesus- some demon possessed. He healed them, and again rebuked the demons who tried to identify Him as the "son of God" or the "Messiah". They cried out: *"You are the Son of God!" But he rebuked them and would not allow them to speak, because they knew he was the Messiah."* (Luke 4:41b)

Then at daybreak Jesus went "to a solitary place" (Luke 4:42). How often I forget that Jesus got tired and needed quiet and refreshment, meditation and prayer, and rest! The people "came to Him" and "they tried to keep Him from leaving them" (Luke 4:42) Cretainly this was a natural and understandable request. Who wouldn't like to have Jesus stay and heal some more sick folks, give them authoritative teaching and love that only came from God! Yet Jesus was resolute- He knew the time He had was short, and He told them: *"I must proclaim the good news of the kingdom of God to the other towns also, because that is why I was sent."* (Luke 4:43). The "good News", the Gospel, needed to be preached in as many places as possible. And the Scripture tells us He did just that: *"He kept on preaching in the synagogues of Judea."* (Luke 4:44)

Joshua 16-18 March 26, 2014 Luke 5:1-16

Now that the tribe and clans of Judah had received their allotment of land, it was time for the other tribes to receive theirs. The tribe of Benjamin (split into Manasseh and Ephraim) were the next. The description of the territory allotted to Ephraim almost reads like a modern legal land description:

"The boundary of their inheritance went from Ataroth Addar in the east to Upper Beth Horon and continued to the Mediterranean Sea. From Mikmethath on the north it curved eastward to Taanath Shiloh, passing by it to Janoah on the east. Then it went down from Janoah to Ataroth and Naarah, touched Jericho and came out at the Jordan. From Tappuah the border went west to the Kanah Ravine and ended at the Mediterranean Sea. This was the inheritance of the tribe of the Ephraimites, according to its clans. It also included all the towns and their villages that were set aside for the Ephraimites within the inheritance of the Manassites." (Josh. 16:5b-9)

The tribe of Manasseh had a similar description:

The territory of Manasseh extended from Asher to Mikmethath east of Shechem. The boundary ran southward from there to include the people living at En Tappuah.

(Manasseh had the land of Tappuah, but Tappuah itself, on the boundary of Manasseh, belonged to the Ephraimites.) Then the boundary continued south to the Kanah Ravine. There were towns belonging to Ephraim lying among the towns of Manasseh, but the boundary of Manasseh was the northern side of the ravine and ended at the Mediterranean Sea. On the south the land belonged to Ephraim, on the north to Manasseh. The territory of Manasseh reached the Mediterranean Sea and bordered Asher on the north and Issachar on the east. Within Issachar and Asher, Manasseh also had Beth Shan, Ibleam and the people of Dor, Endor, Taanach and Megiddo, together with their surrounding settlements (the third in the list is Naphoth[b]). (Josh. 17:7-11) Both the trines of Ephraim and Manasseh had difficulty in removing the last remnannts of the Cannanite tribes that previously live in their land: Ephraim: "They did not dislodge the Canaanites living in Gezer; to this day the Canaanites live among the people of Ephraim but are required to do forced labor." (Josh. 16:10) and Manasseh: *"Yet the Manassites were not able to occupy these towns, for the Canaanites were determined to live in that region. However, when the Israelites grew stronger, they subjected the Canaanites to forced labor but did not drive them out completely."* (Josh. 17:12-13) One wonders if the spiritual history of Israel would have been radically different if these Canaanites had been removed, instead of tolerated.

Yet the people of Joseph (the two tribes) complained that they were "numerous" and did not have a large enough allotment. "Why have you given us only one allotment and one portion for an inheritance? We are a numerous people, and the Lord has blessed us abundantly." (Josh. 17:14b). Joshua insisted they would have enough land if they displaced the Canaanites living in "the forested hill country" (Josh. 17:18). Joshua insisted that it was only a matter of will- if the people of Joseph were committed to victory, it would be theirs: *"Clear it, and its farthest limits will be yours; though the Canaanites have chariots fitted with iron and though they are strong, you can drive them out."* (Josh. 17:18b). Chariots, as you remember, were powerful weapons of war- but God (and His motivated people) were even stronger.

Then the tribe of Benjamin came up next by lot. The territory they were given was between that of Judah and Joseph. The description of their allotment was give as follows:

"On the north side their boundary began at the Jordan, passed the northern slope of Jericho and headed west into the hill country, coming out at the wilderness of Beth Aven. From there it crossed to the south slope of Luz (that is, Bethel) and went down to Ataroth Addar on the hill south of Lower Beth Horon. From the hill facing Beth Horon on the south the boundary turned south along the western side and came out at Kiriath Baal (that is, Kiriath Jearim), a town of the people of Judah. This was the western side. The southern side began at the outskirts of Kiriath Jearim on the west, and the boundary came out at the spring of the waters of Nephtoah. The boundary went down to the foot of the hill facing the Valley of Ben Hinnom, north of the Valley of Rephaim. It continued down the Hinnom Valley along the southern slope of the Jebusite city and so to En Rogel. It then curved north, went to En Shemesh, continued to Geliloth, which faces the Pass of Adummim, and ran down to the Stone of Bohan son of Reuben. It continued to the northern slope of Beth Arabah and on down into the Arabah. It then went to the northern slope of Beth Hoglah and

came out at the northern bay of the Dead Sea, at the mouth of the Jordan in the south. This was the southern boundary. The Jordan formed the boundary on the eastern side." (Josh. 18:12-20)

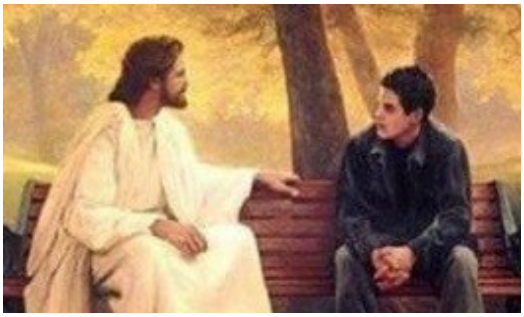
The following towns were assigned to the "tribe of Benjamin":

"Jericho, Beth Hoglah, Emek Keziz, Beth Arabah, Zemaraim, Bethel, Avvim, Parah, Ophrah, Kephar Ammoni, Ophni and Geba—twelve towns and their villages.Gibeon, Ramah, Beeroth, Mizpah, Kephirah, Mozah, Rekem, Irpeel, Taralah, Zelah, Haeleph, the Jebusite city (that is, Jerusalem), Gibeah and Kiriath—fourteen towns and their villages."(Josh 19:21b-28)

Luke 5:1-16

Jesus had a strategic plan to reach the world- but His time was limited. So He made disciples, showing all of us by example what a powerful and efficient method that was (and is) for reaching the world. When we "make a convert" we may or may not spend the careful time in nurture to "make a disciple". Converts could make other convers, disciples WILL make other diciples. And by twos the amazing power of multiplication- God's Principle- works its wonders on a dark and dying world.

Simon was a fisherman, and knew his trade well. Yet Jesus, whose trade was building, told the fisherman to change his approach to fishing! After teaching a crowd at Lake Gennesaret from one of Simon's boats, Jesus said to Simon: *"Put out into deep water, and let down the nets for a catch."* (Luke 5:4) Simon showed both respect for this "rabbi" as well as puzzlement and said" *"Master, we've worked hard all night and haven't caught anything. But because you say so, I will let down the nets."* (Luke 5:5b). And the Scripture tells us: *"When they had done so, they caught such a large number of fish that their nets began to break. So they signaled their partners in the other boat to come and help them, and they came and filled both boats so full that they began to sink."* (Luke 5:6b-7) Peter was surprised and ashamed for his doubt and said to Jesus "Go away from me, Lord; I am a sinful man!" (Luke 5:8b). Not only Peter, but his fishing companions, including the brothers James and John (the sons of Zebedee), were impressed and realized they were in the presence of One who was remarkable, powerful, and different. Jesus had other plans for these three that involved sharing the Good News with people, changing their lives and causing them too to follow this One. Jesus said to them: *"Don't be afraid; from now on you will fish for people."* And the Scripture records that *"they pulled their boats up on shore, left everything and followed him."* (Luke 5:11b). One of my favorite cartoons is of Jesus addressing a young man on a park bench. Jesus is saying "No, I don't mean follow me on Facebook, I mean follow me in person!" How I wish sometimes that following was so easy and effortless. It costs "everything", but flowing Him is the only path to true happiness, fulfilment, and an eternal life with God the Father.



I don't mean follow me on Facebook, I mean follow me in person.
http://www.guc.org.au/Mar2013/node/89

Jesus was then in “one of the towns” and a man approached who is “covered in leprosy”. Leprosy is a very disfiguring disease, and those afflicted with it were required by the Law to separate themselves from others. Many would not even approach such persons, much less touch them. The person touching a leper was ceremonially “unclean” and might even contract the disease. The man said to Jesus: *“Lord, if you are willing, you can make me clean.”* (Luke 5:12) And Jesus WAS willing- to touch him and to cleanse him of this awful disease:

“I am willing,” he said. “Be clean!” And immediately the leprosy left him. (Luke 5:13b).

Jesus, wanting the man to follow the Law, told the “cleansed” man to show himself to the priests and have them declare him clean. He also didn’t want the man to tell anyone, probably for reasons we have discussed before- Jesus didn’t want His ministry to be a “traveling medicine show” that would detract from His mission to God’s people. Jesus said “Don’t tell anyone, but go, show yourself to the priest and offer the sacrifices that Moses commanded for your cleansing, as a testimony to them.” (Luke 5:14b). Yet the Scripture records that the man, or a witness, did “tell someone” and crowds gathered for healing: *“the news about him spread all the more, so that crowds of people came to hear him and to be healed of their sicknesses.”* (Luke 5:15). And so Jesus healed many of them, but needed time alone. How often do we become so involved with the “work of the Lord” that we forget the “Lord of the work”? Jesus needed time alone, to pray, meditate, rest and regroup. So he took the time- and so should we- unapologetically!

Joshua 19-20 March 27, 2014 Luke 5:17-39

The allotments of land continue to be listed in Scripture in Joshua chapters 19 and 20. The allotment for Simeon (Josh. 19:2-9). Note that part of this allotment was taken from that of Judah. The allotment for Zebulon (Josh. 19: 10-16), for Issachar (Josh. 19:17-23), for Asher (Josh. 19:24-31) for Naphtali (Josh. 19:32-39), for Dan (Josh. 19:40-48), and finally for Joshua out of what was left. And the Scripture states: *“And so they finished dividing the land.”* (Josh. 19:51b).

Joshua 20 deals with cities of refuge. These were set up so that "anyone who kills a person accidentally and unintentionally may flee there and find protection from the avenger of blood." (Josh 20:3). When the person enters the city gate, they are *"to stand in the entrance of the city gate and state their case before the elders of that city. Then the elders are to admit the fugitive into their city and provide a place to live among them. If the avenger of blood comes in pursuit, the elders must not surrender the fugitive, because the fugitive killed their neighbor unintentionally and without malice aforethought. They are to stay in that city until they have stood trial before the assembly and until the death of the high priest who is serving at that time. Then they may go back to their own home in the town from which they fled."* (Josh 20:4b-6).

The cities set apart for refuge were Kedesh in Galilee, Shechem in the hill country of Ephraim, Hebron in the hill country of Judah, and east of the Jordan River , Bezer, Ramoth in Gilead, and Golan in Bashan (Josh. 20:7-8). Any Israelite or "any foreigner" (Josh. 20:9) could flee to one of these cities. They were distributed geographically so one would be near any potential offender.

Luke 5:17-39

Jesus went about teaching, preaching, healing and “doing good”. The Scripture states that the “power of the Lord” (Luke 5: 17) was with Him. A crowd was gathered at a house where Jesus was healing- such a crowd that the friends of a sick man could not approach Jesus- so they devised a resourceful plan to open the roof, and lower the sick man on a stretcher to Jesus so he could be healed. Jesus must have been impressed with both their resourcefulness and faith, for He said to the man seeking healing: “Friend, your sins are forgiven.” (Like 5:20b). The Pharisees and teachers who were in attendance- possibly out of curiosity and perhaps to “trap” Jesus were thinking: “Who is this fellow who speaks blasphemy? Who can forgive sins but God alone?” (Luke 5:21). I wonder if they were saying these things as well? Jesus, who *“knew what they were thinking”* (Luke 5:22) asked them: *“Why are you thinking these things in your hearts? Which is easier: to say, ‘Your sins are forgiven,’ or to say, ‘Get up and walk’? But I want you to know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins." So he said to the paralyzed man, “I tell you, get up, take your mat and go home.”* (Luke 5:22b-24). There were two issues here- the first was that Jesus was forgiving sin, and therefore claiming- correctly- equality with God Himself; and since the Pharisees and other “experts” had been taught that God was “one”, then they had a very serious issue with Jesus- to claim that God was “two” was blasphemy to them! The second issue was Jesus’ authority over the created universe. His miracles of healing, of providing for the four and five thousand, casting our demons and walking on the water were miracles designed to give Him credentials (or “street creds”) and to call attention to the glory of God.

The result was immediate and dramatic- the man *“stood up in front of them”*, and he and “everyone” were praising God ! (Luke 5:25-26). The Scripture records that *“They were filled with awe and said, “We have seen remarkable things today.”* (Luke 5:26)

Jesus did not mind “eating with sinners”. Those who were the “good religious people” believed that they should never associate with “sinners” - they might influence them in the wrong way and besides, there was always guilt by association to be considered. Jesus did not hesitate to speak with anyone- Gentiles and Samaritans included, or even the hated tax collectors. When Jesus went to call Matthew (Levi), who held a banquet for many of the tax collectors in the region, the Pharisees questioned Jesus, *“Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?”* (Luke 5:30) Jesus’ answer was succinct- and perhaps even sarcastic- He *replied “It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance.”* (Luke 5:31b-32). I wonder if the Pharisees really believed that they were “healthy”- or was Jesus calling attention to the fact that ALL of us- including them- were in need of repentance. John the Baptists had certainly said so!

Then Jesus and His followers were criticized for not fasting- they compared Jesus with John’s followers: *“John’s disciples often fast and pray, and so do the disciples of the Pharisees, but yours go on eating and drinking.”* (Luke 5:33) Jesus answered them *“Can you make the friends of the bridegroom fast while he is with them? But the time will come when the bridegroom will be taken from them; in those days they will fast.”* (Luke 5:34b-35) Jesus’ reminder can also be found in Ecclesiastes 3- where the “teacher” describes a “time for everything”. Certainly the time for

rejoicing was when Jesus- the bridegroom- was with them on the earth. There would be plenty of time for fasting, praying and meditation and repentance later. Then Jesus told them a short parable:

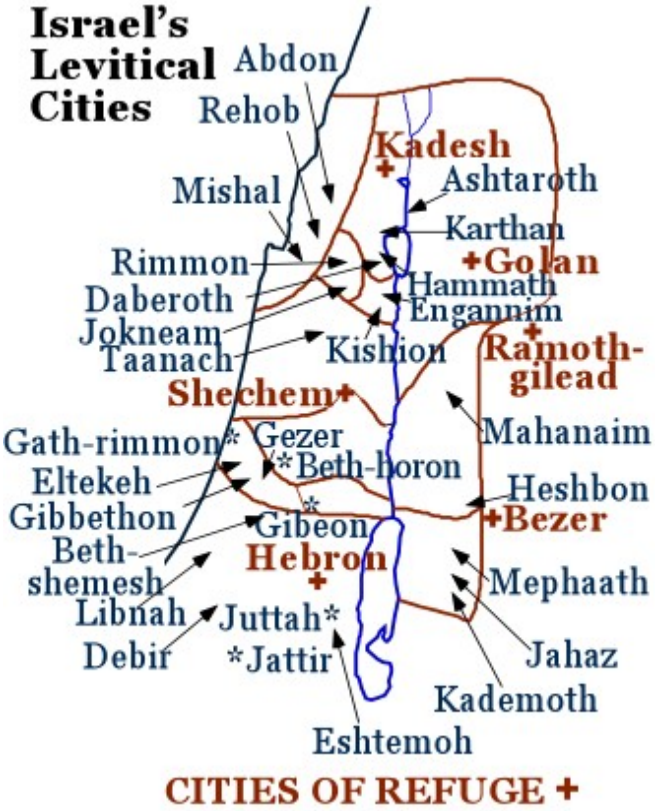
"No one tears a piece out of a new garment to patch an old one. Otherwise, they will have torn the new garment, and the patch from the new will not match the old. And no one pours new wine into old wineskins. Otherwise, the new wine will burst the skins; the wine will run out and the wineskins will be ruined. No, new wine must be poured into new wineskins. And no one after drinking old wine wants the new, for they say, 'The old is better.'" (Luke 5:36b-39)

Jesus was making "all things new" (Rev. 21:5). The new Way (later called Christianity) was radical and entirely new- everyone needed to "re-think" everything in regard to their relationship with God. The "old ways" simply were not adequate- the Law was fulfilled (and not negated), but it was fulfilled in a way that was exciting and unexpected!

Joshua 21-22 March 28, 2014 Luke 6:1-22

Towns for the Levites…they had no real "land inheritance" and yet they performed vital functions for God's people. The heads of the clans of the Levite tribe said to Joshua *"The Lord commanded through Moses that you give us towns to live in, with pasturelands for our livestock."* (Josh 21:2) So Joshua designated towns for the Levites, widely distributed over the territories of the other tribes. The clans mentioned that received towns and pastureland were the Koathites, descendants of Gershon, and descendants of Merari. (Josh 21:4-17). These were all descendants of Aaron- Moses' brother. The Scripture tells us *"The total number of towns for the priests, the descendants of Aaron, came to thirteen, together with their pasturelands."* (Josh 21:19).

Then we have this summary statement: *"The total number of towns allotted to the Merarite clans, who were the rest of the Levites, came to twelve. The towns of the Levites in the territory held by the Israelites were forty-eight in all, together with their pasturelands. Each of these towns had pasturelands surrounding it; this was true for all these towns. So the Lord gave Israel all the land he had sworn to give their ancestors, and they took possession of it and settled there. The Lord gave them rest on every side, just as he had sworn to their ancestors. Not one of their enemies withstood them; the Lord gave all their enemies into their hands. Not one of all the Lord's good promises to Israel failed; every one was fulfilled."* (Josh. 21:40-45)



It was then time for the tribes whose land was east of the Jordan- the "Reubenites, the Gadites and the half-tribe of Manasseh" (Josh. 22:1)- to return to their homes. They had pledged to join with their fellow Israelites to provide troops for the conquest, and had led the conquest by being the first to cross the Jordan. Joshua had promised that once the battles of conquest were over, they would be allowed to return to the land allotted to them where their families and flocks were waiting. They were dispatched with Joshua's blessing, and then a very significant thing occurred. The Scripture says: *"When they came to Geliloth near the Jordan in the land of Canaan, the Reubenites, the Gadites and the half-tribe of Manasseh built an imposing altar there by the Jordan. And when the Israelites heard that they had built the altar on the border of Canaan at Geliloth near the Jordan on the Israelite side, the whole assembly of Israel gathered at Shiloh to go to war against them."* (Josh. 22:10-12).(see http://www.ericasp.com/2011/07/trouble-at-geliloth/) As Eric Asp describes (see the reference cited) "for whatever reason — perhaps hyper-vigilance, hyper-legalism, seeds of distrust, "sibling rivalry," or just some unrecorded piece of misinformation that got out of control — the other 9½ tribes of Israel automatically assume that Reuben, Gad, & ½Manasseh are up to no good: that they're already abandoning the LORD and resorting to idol worship. As soon as they observe the altar being built, they prepare for war!". Fortunately the other 9 ½ tribes were foresighted enough to send a delegation to investigate the building of this altar.

So the other 9 ½ tribes *"... sent Phinehas son of Eleazar, the priest, to the land of Gilead—to Reuben, Gad and the half-tribe of Manasseh. With him they sent ten of the chief men, one from each of the tribes of Israel, each the head of a family*

division among the Israelite clans." (Josh. 22:13v-14) Once this delegation was satisfied that this idol did not represent a departure from faith and worship of the One True God, they decided to stand down the armies who were ready to attack their brother Israelites. As a testimony to the purity of their motive, the 2 ½ tribes said *"The Mighty One, God, the Lord! The Mighty One, God, the Lord! He knows! And let Israel know! If this has been in rebellion or disobedience to the Lord, do not spare us this day. If we have built our own altar to turn away from the Lord and to offer burnt offerings and grain offerings, or to sacrifice fellowship offerings on it, may the Lord himself call us to account."* (Josh 22:22-23) They were basically saying the "God knows what we are doing, and will punish us if we are in error or disobedience" The altar, once a source of discord and misunderstanding, was given a new name: "A Witness Between Us—that the Lord is God." The Hebrew name was "Ed" (KJV) (Josh. 22:34)

Luke 6:1-22

What is the Sabbath? A day for careful keeping of rules? A day of worship? What is its purpose? Jesus had the opportunity to teach about the true nature of the Sabbath when criticized by the Pharisees "Why are you doing what is unlawful on the Sabbath?" (Luke 6:2). Jesus' disciples were picking and eating grain as they passed through a grain field on the Sabbath. To the Pharisees this was "work"- harvesting of grain. Jesus saw the opportunity to teach- not only His friends but also those who opposed Him. He answered them by asking a question: *"Have you never read what David did when he and his companions were hungry? He entered the house of God, and taking the consecrated bread, he ate what is lawful only for priests to eat. And he also gave some to his companions." Then Jesus said to them, "The Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath."* (Luke 6:3b-5) So Jesus assets His lordship over the Sabbath- and suggests that the Sabbath was a gift from God- not an opportunity to brag about keeping seemingly endless rules- or criticizing those who don't keep these rules.

Another opportunity presented itself soon after- a man whose "right hand was shriveled" was at the synagogue where Jesus was teaching. (Luke 6:6). The Pharisees- as usual- were watching to see if Jesus would "break the Sabbath" by healing the man. He knew what the "teachers of the law" were thinking…so he told the man "Get up and stand in front of everyone." (Luke 6:8). Then Jesus asked a question *"I ask you, which is lawful on the Sabbath: to do good or to do evil, to save life or to destroy it?"* (Luke 6:9). Jesus had reduced the whole "complicated" situation- with rules, sub rules and exceptions- down to a single principle- is it acceptable to do good- on the Sabbath or anytime? Later in Luke's gospel, when Jesus is again criticized for healing on the Sabbath, His response is: *"You hypocrites! Doesn't each of you on the Sabbath untie your ox or donkey from the stall and lead it out to give it water? Then should not this woman, a daughter of Abraham, whom Satan has kept bound for eighteen long years, be set free on the Sabbath day from what bound her?"* (Luke 13:15b-16) If mercy to animals was acceptable, why not mercy to one of God's children? The principle is simple, as stated in Hosea Chapter 6:

For I desire mercy, not sacrifice,
and acknowledgment of God rather than burnt offerings. (Hosea 6:6)

The very heart of worship- the very heart of the Sabbath- is mercy, and merciful love!

Jesus then said simply to the man: “Stretch out your hand.” (Luke 6:10)- and Jesus healed hi. The Pharisees were “furious” and plotted to somehow remove this person who they perceived as such a threat to their authority and position (Luke 6:11).

Jesus was in constant prayer- the rhythm of His life was perfectly balanced between reflection, prayer, and “more active” ministry. He had “spent the night praying to God” (Luke 6:12). And afterwards, he chose 12 out of his folllowers (disciples) to be apostles. This was done, I believe, after a long period of communication with the Father. God directed His Son to exactly the right choices- just as he will for us if we “ask”! Jesus chose twelve, named in Luke 6:13:
“Simon (whom he named Peter), his brother Andrew, James, John, Philip, Bartholomew, 15 Matthew, Thomas, James son of Alphaeus, Simon who was called the Zealot, 16 Judas son of James, and Judas Iscariot, who became a traitor.” Note that the Bible does not hesitate to name one of the choices as traitor. Did Jesus have any idea that this one –named last here- would be a betrayer? Judas, some think, was a Zealot and kept the group treasury, the “bag of coins/money” that they used for daily expenses. Was this a bad choice- was this predestined somehow…did God the Father already know that the Plan included a betrayer?

Jesus then goes to preach perhaps His most memorable “long” sermon- here described as being taught on a “level place” (Luke 6:17). In Matthew it is described as being taught on a mountain (Matthew 5). Some have cited this as an “error” or inconsistency in Scripture. My answer to this critique has always been that this was a sermon Jesus preached in several places and at various times. There are certainly many parallels and similarities in the two “sermons”, but they are different enough to suggest similar (but not identical) presentations at different times. (see http://www.sermononthemount.org.uk/Bible/Luke6v20_49.html). Many came, the Scripture reports “to hear him and to be healed of their diseases” (Luke 6:18), and *“the people all tried to touch him, because power was coming from him and healing them all.”* (Luke 6:19). Certainly there were good reasons for many to seek Him out.

What did Jesus teach in this sermon? Certainly the subjects and issues Jesus taught us in this marvelous sermon have been analyzed, debated, dissected and described in scholarly journals and in many other venues. In my estimation, the whole sermon is about the heart. When one of God’s children allows Him to change their heart (2 Cor. 5:17) they become a “new creature”. When God is allowed to touch and change our hearts- everything we are, do, say and believe changes. We allow the glorious perfection and majesty of God to touch us in personal and transforming ways- most of which we would never expect. The “natural” response when we are “poor”, “hungry”, “weep” are insulted and “hated” is to feel sorry for ourselves. Why did God allow us to become this way? How could a loving God treat us with such “disdain”? And yet when we are truly His- we discover the true “wealth” (Matthew 6:19), the true “food”- the very bread of life (John 6:32-35), the joy that

fills our very souls (Psalm 30:5), and a royal family in which we are loved and treasured by God (1 Peter 2:9).

Joshua 23-24 March 29, 2014 Luke 6:27-49

It was time for Joshua to step down from leadership of God's people. He was approaching old age, and summoned the leaders of the tribes of Israel to hear his farewell to them: *"Be very strong; be careful to obey all that is written in the Book of the Law of Moses, without turning aside to the right or to the left. Do not associate with these nations that remain among you; do not invoke the names of their gods or swear by them. You must not serve them or bow down to them. But you are to hold fast to the Lord your God, as you have until now."* (Josh. 23:6-8) he knew that a new leader – or leaders- would be needed to keep the nation headed in a positive and Godly direction. This would require focus, remembering- and doing- God's will as revealed in the Law, and a great measure of faith in God's deliverance and courage to face the enemies that still surrounded this young nation.

One critical thing that God's people must not do is to tolerate, assimilate and accept the practices of the pagan people that surrounded them. They must hold fast to God's way, and avoid the lure of the pagan practices around them or *"Instead, they will become snares and traps for you, whips on your backs and thorns in your eyes, until you perish from this good land, which the Lord your God has given you."* (Josh. 23:13b).

Joshua seemed to have peace about his life and leadership, and was about to join his ancestors and go "the way of all the earth" (Josh. 23:14). He knew that God had kept His promises and His covenant with the people *"You know with all your heart and soul that not one of all the good promises the Lord your God gave you has failed. Every promise has been fulfilled; not one has failed."* (Josh 23:14)- they knew this from experience in trusting God! The warning, however, was very clear: *"If you violate the covenant of the Lord your God, which he commanded you, and go and serve other gods and bow down to them, the Lord's anger will burn against you, and you will quickly perish from the good land he has given you."* (Josh. 23:16) The choice is clear- love God, follow His commands and Laws, and prosper- or disobey and die.

The covenant was then renewed at Schechem. Joshua again summoned the leaders of the people, and reminded them of their heritage and history- the history of God's mighty acts of deliverance among them:

"This is what the Lord, the God of Israel, says: 'Long ago your ancestors, including Terah the father of Abraham and Nahor, lived beyond the Euphrates River and worshiped other gods. But I took your father Abraham from the land beyond the Euphrates and led him throughout Canaan and gave him many descendants. I gave him Isaac, and to Isaac I gave Jacob and Esau. I assigned the hill country of Seir to Esau, but Jacob and his family went down to Egypt.

“‘Then I sent Moses and Aaron, and I afflicted the Egyptians by what I did there, and I brought you out. 6 When I brought your people out of Egypt, you came to the sea, and the Egyptians pursued them with chariots and horsemen as far as the Red Sea. But they cried to the Lord for help, and he put darkness between you and the Egyptians; he brought the sea over them and covered them. You saw with your own eyes what I did to the Egyptians. Then you lived in the wilderness for a long time.

“‘I brought you to the land of the Amorites who lived east of the Jordan. They fought against you, but I gave them into your hands. I destroyed them from before you, and you took possession of their land.When Balak son of Zippor, the king of Moab, prepared to fight against Israel, he sent for Balaam son of Beor to put a curse on you. But I would not listen to Balaam, so he blessed you again and again, and I delivered you out of his hand.

“‘Then you crossed the Jordan and came to Jericho. The citizens of Jericho fought against you, as did also the Amorites, Perizzites, Canaanites, Hittites, Girgashites, Hivites and Jebusites, but I gave them into your hands. I sent the hornet ahead of you, which drove them out before you—also the two Amorite kings. You did not do it with your own sword and bow. So I gave you a land on which you did not toil and cities you did not build; and you live in them and eat from vineyards and olive groves that you did not plant.’

“Now fear the Lord and serve him with all faithfulness. Throw away the gods your ancestors worshiped beyond the Euphrates River and in Egypt, and serve the Lord. But if serving the Lord seems undesirable to you, then choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your ancestors served beyond the Euphrates, or the gods of the Amorites, in whose land you are living. But as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord.” (Josh 24:2b-15)
Choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve! A challenge that the people quickly accepted- they assented to this, but unfortunately for many it was “easy to say but hard to do”. It has always been easy to “agree” with God- at least in word- but the real test is the fruit we bear and the light and salt we bring to the world by living in harmony with God’s will and perfect plan for our lives.

Then Joshua placed a large stone near the “holy place of the Lord” as a reminder and a witness to the assent of the people: *Then he took a large stone and set it up there under the oak near the holy place of the Lord. “See!” he said to all the people. “This stone will be a witness against us. It has heard all the words the Lord has said to us. It will be a witness against you if you are untrue to your God.” Then Joshua dismissed the people, each to their own inheritance.”* (Josh 24:26b-28).

And so Joshua’s life came to a close- a faithful and courageous leader, a seeker and followr of God’s will, a living testimony to the power of the Living God: *“ After these things, Joshua son of Nun, the servant of the Lord, died at the age of a hundred and*

ten. And they buried him in the land of his inheritance, at Timnath Serah in the hill country of Ephraim, north of Mount Gaash." (Josh. 24:29-20)

Luke 6:27-49

Love- "makes the world go 'round"….is the goal of everyone in this life- to love and be loved, and accepted by God. We so easily define love as that bond of friendship, that connection between parent and child, that amazing and powerful attraction between two who are "in love". God's love has a different quality, and goes beyond what we might call our "natural" or expected experience. God loved us "while we were sinners" (Romans 5:8). His love and grace are His "willing the good" (agape) for us, and preparing the way for us to decide to love Him or reject Him. Jesus was teaching about this kind of "exceptional" and "extraordinary" love in the Sermon "on the plain" (Luke 6:20-49).

Jesus' instruction was about several topics: 1) loving others- even "enemies" (Luke 6:27-36); 2) judging others (Luke 6:37-42); 3) bearing fruit (Luke 6:43-45); and 4) a parable about wise and foolish builders (Luke 6:46-49). Jesus, when asked what the "greatest commandment" was, answered from the Scriptures- love God (Deut. 6:4-5) and love others "as ourselves" (Lev. 19:18).

Enemies are not among those that we "naturally love", but Jesus challenges us to love them. I find it hard to pray for Islamic fundamentalist terrorists, for Progressives and Liberals, and so many others. How can God really expect me to "wish the good- wish or pray for God's very best" for such as these? Yet that is exactly what Jesus says we are to do- with no real "wiggle room" and without excuses as to how difficult it is to do this! Only through the power of the Holy Spirit is this possible- only after God has changed our hearts can we really do this.

Judging others- a natural and seemingly unavoidable exercise of our own "righteousness, wisdom and Godly judgment" -is mostly a fruitless and damaging exercise. Instead of looking at our own heart- which is often in spiritual darkness- we instead insist on "seeing" the evil and "bad intentions" of others. Jesus says we are blinded by the "plank" in our own eye that prevents us from seeing the "speck of dust" in others' eyes. (Luke 6:42). We are truly "blind" (Luke 6:39). We are instead to follow these Words: *"Do not judge, and you will not be judged. Do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven. Give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together and running over, will be poured into your lap. For with the measure you use, it will be measured to you."* (Luke 6:37-38)

So many times we resist being accountable- for our efforts, our witness, our seemingly endless "working for the Lord". Yet God expects us- commands us- to "bear fruit". Ironically, it is only the "fruit" of others that we are allowed to evaluate- we cannot see another's heart (Matthew 7:16; 20). Jesus teaches- and we see clearly, at least in others that: *"A good man brings good things out of the good*

stored up in his heart, and an evil man brings evil things out of the evil stored up in his heart. For the mouth speaks what the heart is full of. " (Luke 6:45).

What do we build on- are our lives constructed on a sound foundation? The analogy/parable of building was one the people understood. A strong building- one that least and weathers the storm, must have a strong foundation. As the old hymn goes "On Christ the Solid Rock I stand, all other ground is sinking sand" ("My Hope is Built on Nothing Less" by Edward Mote, 1797-1874). When we don't build on a solid foundation, then the result is a disaster: *"But the one who hears my words and does not put them into practice is like a man who built a house on the ground without a foundation. The moment the torrent struck that house, it collapsed and its destruction was complete."* (Luke 6:49). Note that we must not only hear the Word but also practice it!

Judges 1-2 March 30, 2014 Luke 7:1-30

So now Joshua was gone, but some of the Canaanites remained in the land. So God led Judah and the Simeonites to form an army and drive out the pagans from the land God had promised to them. (Judges 1:1-3). The attack was successful, and *"the Lord gave the Canaanites and Perizzites into their hands, and they struck down ten thousand men at Bezek. It was there that they found Adoni-Bezek and fought against him, putting to rout the Canaanites and Perizzites. Adoni-Bezek fled, but they chased him and caught him, and cut off his thumbs and big toes."* (Judges 1:4b-6) This practice was common among captured prisoners to partially incapacitate them and humiliate them.(

http://genesistomalachi.weebly.com/1/post/2012/10/why-were-adoni-bezeks-thumbs-and-big-toes-cut-off.html)

And so the men of Judah and the Simeonites were largely successful against their enemies, but there were some Canaanites who were able to resist *"The Lord was with the men of Judah. They took possession of the hill country, but they were unable to drive the people from the plains, because they had chariots fitted with iron. As Moses had promised, Hebron was given to Caleb, who drove from it the three sons of Anak. The Benjamites, however, did not drive out the Jebusites, who were living in Jerusalem; to this day the Jebusites live there with the Benjamites."* (Judges 1:19-21) The iron chariots were the difference here- later Israel's disobedience would be the issue.

The Cannanites were not removed from the land, but some were able to remain. *"But Manasseh did not drive out the people of Beth Shan or Taanach or Dor or Ibleam or Megiddo and their surrounding settlements, for the Canaanites were determined to live in that land. When Israel became strong, they pressed the Canaanites into forced labor but never drove them out completely. Nor did Ephraim drive out the Canaanites living in Gezer, but the Canaanites continued to live there among them. Neither did Zebulun drive out the Canaanites living in Kitron or Nahalol, so these Canaanites lived among them, but Zebulun did subject them to forced labor. Nor did Asher drive out those living in Akko or Sidon or Ahlab or Akzib or Helbah or Aphek or Rehob. The Asherites lived among the Canaanite inhabitants of the land because they did not drive them out."* (Judges 1:27-32). The Cannanites would be a distraction, a trap for the true worship of God, and a constant reminder to God's people of the incomplete mission that they were given by God.

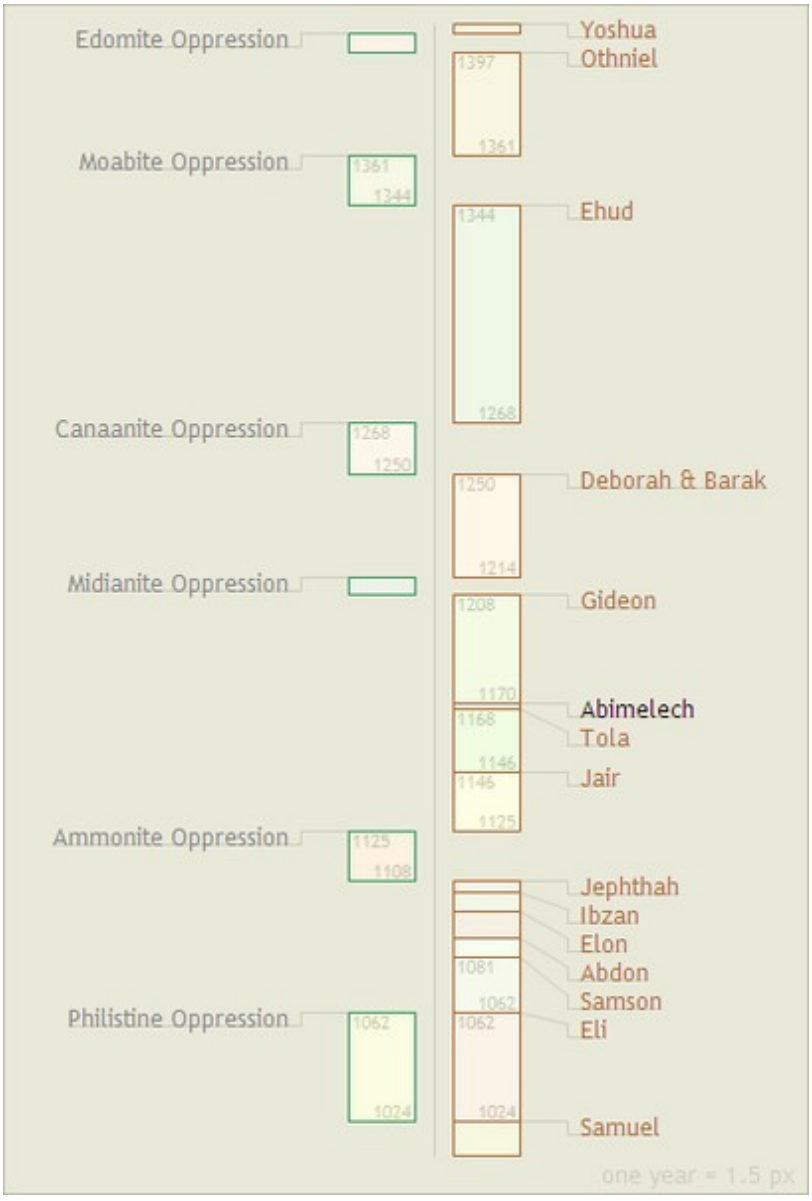
God sent an angel to the people- with this message*: "I brought you up out of Egypt and led you into the land I swore to give to your ancestors. I said, 'I will never break my covenant with you, and you shall not make a covenant with the people of this land, but you shall break down their altars.' Yet you have disobeyed me. Why have you done this? And I have also said, 'I will not drive them out before you; they will become traps for you, and their gods will become snares to you.'"* (Judges 2:1b-3) The insidious nature of the Canaanite religious practices cannot be overstated- the people of God did not "break down the altars"- the pagan places of worship- and they became a temptation to the people and a source of division among the people. And the people "wept aloud" (Judges 2:4), but the weeping did not accomplish the true intent of God- to eradicate this constant source of distraction and temptation from God's people. We cannot, it turns out, be so "tolerant" that we accept- and sometimes tacitly approve or even assimilate- pagan practices. This is another instance of "partial obedience" being the same as "disobedience"!

Now with Joshua gone and buried (Judges 2:9-10), the situation and the spiritual condition of God's people rapidly declined- only taking a generation: *"After that whole generation had been gathered to their ancestors, another generation grew up who knew neither the Lord nor what he had done for Israel. Then the Israelites did evil in the eyes of the Lord and served the Baals. They forsook the Lord, the God of their ancestors, who had brought them out of Egypt. They followed and worshiped various gods of the peoples around them. They aroused the Lord's anger because*

they forsook him and served Baal and the Ashtoreths. In his anger against Israel the Lord gave them into the hands of raiders who plundered them. He sold them into the hands of their enemies all around, whom they were no longer able to resist. Whenever Israel went out to fight, the hand of the Lord was against them to defeat them, just as he had sworn to them. They were in great distress." (Judges 2:10-15) It is so typical of us- we constantly live asking God "what have you done for me lately?" or "what's in it for me?", and forget- so quickly, it seems, the grace and mighty acts of our Living God!

God had an answer for the faithlessness and forgetfulness of His people- He created a system of "judges"- righteous men and women called to serve God and provide leadership for the people. Some of the judges were less than spectacular morally and spiritually (like Samson- Judges 13-16), but many were faithful and courageous. Both men and women served as judges (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Biblical_judges). The sad cycle, repeated so often was that first God would raise up a judge, things would go well for a while, then the judge would die or the people rebel, and misery and defeat visited God's people. They would then cry out to God, who would raise up still another judge, and the cycle would repeat. The presence of the judge did not change the spiritual condition of the people- their sin nature would ultimately cause defeat and disobedience. *"Then the Lord raised up judges,[h] who saved them out of the hands of these raiders. Yet they would not listen to their judges but prostituted themselves to other gods and worshiped them. They quickly turned from the ways of their ancestors, who had been obedient to the Lord's commands. Whenever the Lord raised up a judge for them, he was with the judge and saved them out of the hands of their enemies as long as the judge lived; for the Lord relented because of their groaning under those who oppressed and afflicted them. But when the judge died, the people returned to ways even more corrupt than those of their ancestors, following other gods and serving and worshiping them. They refused to give up their evil practices and stubborn ways."* (Judges 2:16-19)

God became weary of this constant cycle of "obedience" and disobedience, so he declared to His people: "I will no longer drive out before them any of the nations Joshua left when he died." (Judges 2:21). Instead, God used the pagan people and nations as a "test" to *"see whether they will keep the way of the Lord and walk in it as their ancestors did."* (Judges 2:22).



"Biblical Judges" from Wikipedia

Luke 7:1-30

Faith in a centurion? The very people oppressing the Jews? How is this possible? Yet Jesus, who like His Father saw the heart of man (1 Sam. 16:7), saw the faith and trust in this child of the Living God! The soldier was in charge of about 100 men or more (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Centurion) Apparently this man was well thought of by the Jews, and had been helpful to them: *"This man deserves to have you do this, because he loves our nation and has built our synagogue." So Jesus went with them."* (Luke 7:4b-6) When Jesus heard about the centurion's servant who was ill, Jesus "went to him". The centurion knew that a Jew could not enter the home of a Gentile and be "clean", so he simply asked Jesus to heal the servant "from a distance". He said to Jesus "say the word, and my servant will be healed." (Luke

7:7b). Just as God had "spoken" the Word at the beginning, he somehow knew that Jesus could "say a word" and this healing would be accomplished!
Jesus was impressed with the faith of this man: *"When Jesus heard this, he was amazed at him, and turning to the crowd following him, he said, "I tell you, I have not found such great faith even in Israel." Then the men who had been sent returned to the house and found the servant well."* (Luke 7:9b-10) What a testimony to faith…!

A widow's son had died, and the funeral procession was approaching. Jesus, seeing the opportunity to bring glory and praise to God, moved quickly. *"Then he went up and touched the bier they were carrying him on, and the bearers stood still. He said, "Young man, I say to you, get up!" 15 The dead man sat up and began to talk, and Jesus gave him back to his mother."* (Luke 7:14-15) So first Jesus had compassion: "When the Lord saw her, his heart went out to her and he said, "Don't cry." (Luke 7:13), and then He acted decisively and with the power of the Spirit to bring life, healing and glory to God. This is the "how" and "why" of all real miracles- they are always done to bring glory to the Father.

John was in prison- mostly for telling the truth. Perhaps he was discouraged, or having a crisis of confidence or of faith. After all, he had proclaimed Jesus as the Messiah, and had conducted His baptism and heard of the teaching. Preaching and miraculous healings that Jesus was performing. He asked the question- through his disciples- *"Are you the one who is to come, or should we expect someone else?"* (Luke 7:19b). And the answer was clear and definitive *""Go back and report to John what you have seen and heard: The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is proclaimed to the poor. Blessed is anyone who does not stumble on account of me."* (Luke 7:22b-23). Then the crowd, ever fickle, asked Jesus about John. Jesus answered them by summarizing who John was, and what he had meant to God's plan to usher in the Kingdom: *"What did you go out into the wilderness to see? A reed swayed by the wind? If not, what did you go out to see? A man dressed in fine clothes? No, those who wear expensive clothes and indulge in luxury are in palaces. But what did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. This is the one about whom it is written:*

"'I will send my messenger ahead of you,
who will prepare your way before you.' (Luke 7:24b-27)

John was "among those born of women" the greatest, but the one who is "least in the Kingdom" is greater than John. So even though John had achieved righteousness through right living, he was the messenger of the "real power" of the Holy Spirit and the One who would bring it to men. (Luke 7:28). The people hearing Jesus' words, acknowledges that "God's way was right", but not the Pharisees- they had rejected God's purpose for themselves (Luke 7:29-30).

Judges 3-5 March 31, 2014 Luke 7:31-50

So the presence of the Canaanites continued in the Promised Land- they had not all been "driven out" by God's people. Some of them listed in Judges 3 were there

because God permitted them to stay: *"…he did this only to teach warfare to the descendants of the Israelites who had not had previous battle experience."* (Judges 3:2). They were left to *"test the Israelites to see whether they would obey the Lord's commands, which he had given their ancestors through Moses."* (Judges 3:4). The first part of Judges 3 ends with this sad commentary: *The Israelites lived among the Canaanites, Hittites, Amorites, Perizzites, Hivites and Jebusites. 6 They took their daughters in marriage and gave their own daughters to their sons, and served their gods.* (Judges 3:5b-6)
Then a cycle began with the first "judge" raised up by God. The people sinned, served other gods, and did "evil", then they were oppressed (usually by a foreign power nearby geographically), they cried out to God, and He sent a deliverer. Then the people repeated the cycle once the oppression was over- they went back to their old, evil ways. Later Paul expresses his frustration with the "cycle of sin"- particularly the sin that recurs, that plagues us almost constantly, and from which we feel powerless to remove ourselves (Romans 7:24). In this first instance, God raises up Othiniel: *"The Israelites did evil in the eyes of the Lord; they forgot the Lord their God and served the Baals and the Asherahs. The anger of the Lord burned against Israel so that he sold them into the hands of Cushan-Rishathaim king of Aram Naharaim, to whom the Israelites were subject for eight years. But when they cried out to the Lord, he raised up for them a deliverer, Othniel son of Kenaz, Caleb's younger brother, who saved them."* (Judges 3:7-9) Then the land had peace for "forty years"- roughly two generations. Long enough for many to forget the oppression – and its cause- and long enough for the deliverer Othiniel to die.

The cycle then repeats with Ehud: *"Again the Israelites did evil in the eyes of the Lord, and because they did this evil the Lord gave Eglon king of Moab power over Israel. Getting the Ammonites and Amalekites to join him, Eglon came and attacked Israel, and they took possession of the City of Palms. The Israelites were subject to Eglon king of Moab for eighteen years. Again the Israelites cried out to the Lord, and he gave them a deliverer—Ehud, a left-handed man, the son of Gera the Benjamite.* (Judges 3:12-15). Two aspects to this judge's story are worth noting- Ehud was left handed. The Latin word for left handed is "sinister", and the way that a swordsman used his left hand could be sinister. Customarily, when giving a friendly greeting, two men shake their right hands- the sword hand- symbolically showing that they are- at least temporarily- not using their "sword hand". A left handed man could shake his right hand and still attack with the left! Ehud did so in a version of this custom by attacking the king (Eglon) with his left hand! "The handshake is thought by some to have originated as a gesture of peace by demonstrating that the hand holds no weapon" (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Handshake). After stabbing the king with his left hand and leaving him to die, Eglon summoned the Israeli army which had been waiting nearby "in the hills" and destroyed the Moabites: *" At that time they struck down about ten thousand Moabites, all vigorous and strong; not one escaped. 30 That day Moab was made subject to Israel, and the land had peace for eighty years."* (Judges 3:29b-30) This cycle the "peace" lasted eighty years.

The next "judge" mentioned is Shamgar, who defeated the Philistines, who: *"struck down six hundred Philistines with an oxgoad."* (Judges 3:31b). This snippet of a story is reminiscent of Samson, a later judge who (among many other things): *"Finding a fresh jawbone of a donkey, he grabbed it and struck down a thousand men."* (Judges 15:15).

Then we encounter the story of Deborah, the only female judge. Deborah was a prophetess, and the wife of Lappidoth (Judges 4:4). She sent for Barak son of Abinoam from Kedesh and told him to join her in battle against Sisera's army. He replied that he would only go if Debra went with him *"The LORD, the God of Israel, commands you: 'Go, take with you ten thousand men of Naphtali and Zebulun and lead them up to Mount Tabor.' I will lead Sisera, the commander of Jabin's army, with his chariots and his troops to the Kishon River and give him into your hands.'"* (Judges 4:6b-7) The men, ten thousand in number, were to come from Zebulon and Naptali: *"Barak summoned Zebulun and Naphtali, and ten thousand men went up under his command. Deborah also went up with him."* (Judges 4:10b). According to Wikipedia:

"The people of Israel had been oppressed by Jabin, the king of Canaan, whose capital was Hazor, for twenty years. Stirred by the wretched condition of Israel she incites a rebellion, and sends to Barak, the son of Abinoam, at Kedesh of Naphtali, and directs him to muster ten thousand troops of Naphtali and Zebulun and concentrate them upon Mount Tabor, the mountain at the northern angle of the great plain of Esdraelon. At the same time she states that she will draw Sisera to the River Kishon. Barak declines to go without the prophetess. Deborah consents, but declares that the glory of the victory will therefore belong to a woman. As soon as the news of the rebellion reaches Sisera he collects nine hundred chariots of iron and a host of people." (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Deborah).

The battle went well for the Israelites, even though the opposing army was equipped with chariots: *"At Barak's advance, the Lord routed Sisera and all his chariots and army by the sword, and Sisera got down from his chariot and fled on foot."* (Judges 4:15). Sisera fled and took refuge in the tent of *"Jael, the wife of Heber the Kenite, because there was an alliance between Jabin king of Hazor and the family of Heber the Kenite."* (Judges 4:17). The Scripture tells us that previously: *"... Heber the Kenite had left the other Kenites, the descendants of Hobab, Moses' brother-in-law,[h] and pitched his tent by the great tree in Zaanannim near Kedesh."* (Judges 4:11) So the tent, and Jael, were in exactly the right place at the right time- as God had directed them! Jael welcomes Sisera, and when he asks for water, gives him warm milk instead. After Sisera fell asleep, exhausted from his flight, *"...Jael, Heber's wife, picked up a tent peg and a hammer and went quietly to him while he lay fast asleep, exhausted. She drove the peg through his temple into the ground, and he died."* (Judges 4:21b). So now the whole army of Sisera was defeated and destroyed, and the leader lay dead- killed by a woman with a tent stake. And the leader of the Philistines, Jabin- king of Canaan, was totally defeated: "*On that day God subdued Jabin king of Canaan before the Israelites. And the hand of the Israelites pressed harder and harder against Jabin king of Canaan until they destroyed him."* (Judges 4:23b-24).

Judges 5 is the victory song of Deborah and Barak. After this song is recorded, the Scripture tells us: "*Then the land had peace forty years."* (Judges 5:31) It is notable that the song of victory gives praise to God:

"When the princes in Israel take the lead,

when the people willingly offer themselves—
praise the Lord!
"Hear this, you kings! Listen, you rulers!
I, even I, will sing to the Lord;
I will praise the Lord, the God of Israel, in song. (Judges 5:2-3)

Luke 7:31-50

Jesus was understandably frustrated. The "people" criticized Him and the disciples for "eating and drinking" and not "fasting". Yet they criticized John for leading an austere life, saying he had a "demon" (Luke 7:33-34). Jesus concludes by saying "But wisdom is proved right by all her children." (Luke 7:35).

Jesus was at a "Pharisee's house". No detail is given as to why Jesus was there. Was this a Pharisee who had decided that Jesus was, indeed, the One they were so eagerly waiting for? Had he been healed, or a family member touched by Jesus and healed. Or was he just so impressed with this charismatic young Rabbi that he wished to spend time with Him? Regardless, the hospitality of the Pharisee's home had been extended. While they were eating together, a remarkable thing happened. A *"woman in that town who lived a sinful life learned that Jesus was eating at the Pharisee's house, so she came there with an alabaster jar of perfume. As she stood behind him at his feet weeping, she began to wet his feet with her tears. Then she wiped them with her hair, kissed them and poured perfume on them."* (Luke 7:37b-38) Some scholars have suggested that this is the same woman recorded in all four gospel accounts, with some difference in the details of the story. (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anointing_of_Jesus). Now the host Pharisee objects to this extravagant display: *"If this man were a prophet, he would know who is touching him and what kind of woman she is—that she is a sinner."* (Luke 7:39b). Jesus answers by asking Peter a question: *"Two people owed money to a certain moneylender. One owed him five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. Neither of them had the money to pay him back, so he forgave the debts of both. Now which of them will love him more?"* (Luke 7:41-42). Simon answers correctly, and Jesus uses this as a teachable moment: Then he turned toward the woman and said to Simon (the Pharisee): *"Do you see this woman? I came into your house. You did not give me any water for my feet, but she wet my feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair. You did not give me a kiss, but this woman, from the time I entered, has not stopped kissing my feet. You did not put oil on my head, but she has poured perfume on my feet. Therefore, I tell you, her many sins have been forgiven—as her great love has shown. But whoever has been forgiven little loves little."* (Luke 7:44b-47)

The Jesus turns to the woman who has loved Jesus so extravagantly and passionately and tells her: *"Your sins are forgiven."* (Luke 7:48b). The "guests" questioned Jesus' authority *"Who is this who even forgives sins?"* (Luke 7:49b). And Jesus replies to her: *"Your faith has saved you; go in peace."* So the clear lesson is- love passionately, give sacrificially, and your acts and attitudes will be pleasing to God. How difficult it is for so many of us- myself certainly included- to simply and passionately love Jesus! And yet the reward is so great- blessing in this life and fellowship with Him in the life to come. What a Savior!

Christ in the House of Simon by Dieric Bouts

Judges 6-7 April 1, 2014 Luke 8:1-21

The next enemy to plague God's people were the Midianites. They were oppressive and cruel; *"Whenever the Israelites planted their crops, the Midianites, Amalekites and other eastern peoples invaded the country. They camped on the land and ruined the crops all the way to Gaza and did not spare a living thing for Israel, neither sheep nor cattle nor donkeys. They came up with their livestock and their tents like swarms of locusts. It was impossible to count them or their camels; they invaded the land to ravage it. Midian so impoverished the Israelites that they cried out to the Lord for help."* (Judges 6:3b-6). We see the familiar pattern- the people turn from God and worship idols and perform other "detestable" acts, then a foreign power invades and oppresses the people- and only then do they cry out for help from God. This time God sent Gideon as a deliverer: *"The angel of the Lord came and sat down under the oak in Ophrah that belonged to Joash the Abiezrite, where his son Gideon was threshing wheat in a winepress to keep it from the Midianites. When the angel of the Lord appeared to Gideon, he said, "The Lord is with you, mighty warrior."* (Judges 6:11-12). Gideon was surprised to be greeted in such a manner, and asked the angel: *"Pardon me, my lord," Gideon replied, "but if the Lord is with us, why has all this happened to us? Where are all his wonders that our ancestors told us about when they said, 'Did not the Lord bring us up out of Egypt?' But now the Lord has abandoned us and given us into the hand of Midian."* (Judges 6:13) God selected Gideon, from the weakest clan in Manasseh, and the least in that family! But God was not through with His plan to demonstrate His mighty power- and our weakness!

God promised to Gideon: "I will be with you, and you will strike down all the Midianites, leaving none alive." (Judges 6:16b). But Gideon wanted to be certain of the identity of the One sending him on this mission. So Gideon made an offering of

meat and grain on a stone altar, and *"Then the angel of the Lord touched the meat and the unleavened bread with the tip of the staff that was in his hand. Fire flared from the rock, consuming the meat and the bread. And the angel of the Lord disappeared."* (Judges 6:21). Gideon was surprised and overwhelmed *: "Alas, Sovereign Lord! I have seen the angel of the Lord face to face!". He was told: "Peace! Do not be afraid. You are not going to die."* (Judges 6:23b). Then the Lord told Gideon to tear down his father's altar to Ball, as well as the Asherah pole, and construct an altar to God in its place. This was a demonstration by God to Gideon as to how detestable and offensive such altars to pagan "gods" were to Him.(Judges 6:25-26). He was to use the wood from the Asherah pole to sacrifice the bull. Gideon was afraid of the reaction of the local people, so he did all this by night. When daylight came, the new altar- and the smashed and destroyed old one- were clearly visible. *"They asked each other, "Who did this?" When they carefully investigated, they were told, "Gideon son of Joash did it."* (Judges 6:29).

The people then demanded that Gideon "must die" (Judges 6:30). But Joash, Gideon's father told the people *"Are you going to plead Baal's cause? Are you trying to save him? Whoever fights for him shall be put to death by morning! If Baal really is a god, he can defend himself when someone breaks down his altar." So because Gideon broke down Baal's altar, they gave him the name Jerub-Baal that day, saying, "Let Baal contend with him."* (Judges 6:31b-32).
Gideon then went through the camps, blowing a horn to summon the troops to battle. The Midianites had assembled an alliance of Israel's enemies to fight against them, and camped at Jezreel.

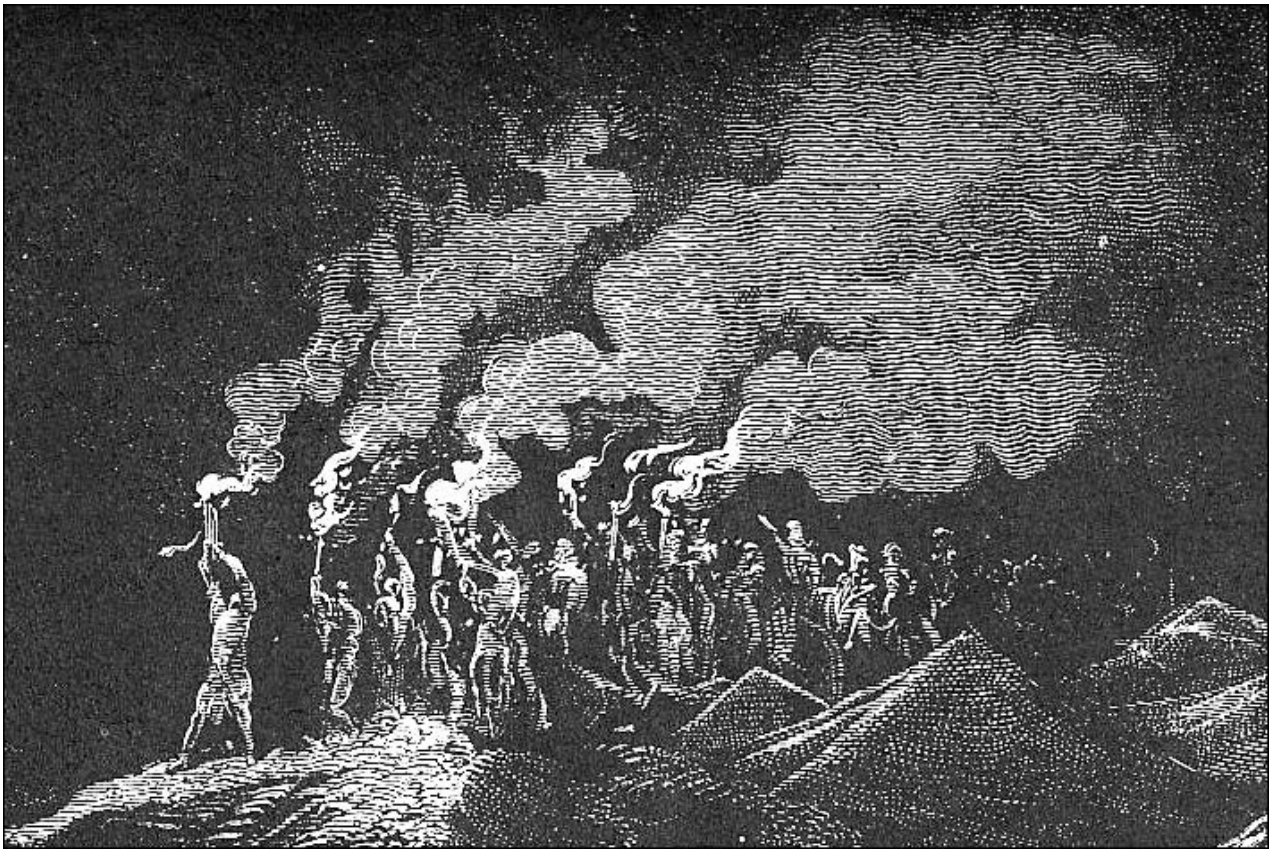
Gideon still wanted further assurance from God- so he dived a "test" with fleece. He told God: *"If you will save Israel by my hand as you have promised— look, I will place a wool fleece on the threshing floor. If there is dew only on the fleece and all the ground is dry, then I will know that*

you will save Israel by my hand, as you said." And that is what happened. Gideon rose early the next day; he squeezed the fleece and wrung out the dew—a bowlful of water. (Judges 6:36b-38). Still not totally satisfied, he decide on another "test", so he pleaded with God: *"Do not be angry with me. Let me make just one more request. Allow me one more test with the fleece, but this time make the fleece dry and let the ground be covered with dew." That night God did so. Only the fleece was dry; all the ground was covered with dew."* (Judges 6:39b-40). This is known in modern theological circles as "putting out the fleece" to test the correctness of a plan of action- to see if it aligns with the will of God.(http://www.brandonweb.com/sermons/sermonpages/judges3.htm) Gideon had been given clear assurance by God that he would triumph, but it is a testimony to he (and our) human weakness that we often want a "sign from God"- very much like some of Jesus' critics demanded from Him.

Gideon's army was camped at the spring of Harod (Judges 7:1). God told Gideon that he had "too many men"…that the victory over the Midianites could be attributed to the strength and number of the army- and not to God. "The Lord said to Gideon, "You have too many men. I cannot deliver Midian into their hands, or

Israel would boast against me, *'My own strength has saved me.'Now announce to the army, 'Anyone who trembles with fear may turn back and leave Mount Gilead.'" So twenty-two thousand men left, while ten thousand remained."* (Judges 7:2-3). Now the army was down to ten thousand- but God told Gideon there were still "too many" The criterion for selection was how the men drank their water from the spring: There the Lord told him, *"Separate those who lap the water with their tongues as a dog laps from those who kneel down to drink." Three hundred of them drank from cupped hands, lapping like dogs. All the rest got down on their knees to drink. The Lord said to Gideon, "With the three hundred men that lapped I will save you and give the Midianites into your hands. Let all the others go home." So Gideon sent the rest of the Israelites home but kept the three hundred, who took over the provisions and trumpets of the others."* (Judges 7:5b-8). Now the army was down to 300- how could such a small number defeat so large an enemy? They could because the Lord God of the universe was to fight for them!

Gideon sent out spies to listen to what the enemy was saying. Gideon heard these words *"I had a dream," he was saying. "A round loaf of barley bread came tumbling into the Midianite camp. It struck the tent with such force that the tent overturned and collapsed." His friend responded, "This can be nothing other than the sword of Gideon son of Joash, the Israelite. God has given the Midianites and the whole camp into his hands."* (Judges 7:13b-14). And so, emboldened by this report of poor morale and fear of Gideon in the camp, Gideon divided the three hundred men into groups of 100. Armed with trumpets, jars to break and create a great noise, and torches- the three groups of Hebrews routed the camp. They shouted *"A sword for the Lord and for Gideon!"* (Judges 7:20b) There was so much confusion that the Midianites fought each other (Judges 7:22b). The two kings of Midian, Zeeb and Ored, were killed and their heads were brought to Gideon. So the "reluctant warrior" enjoyed a great victory- one that would always be attributed to God and not to men. The reason was simple- the battle is the Lord's (1 Samuel 17:47)



Gustave Doré detail from "The Midianites Put to Flight" (1865), woodcut

Luke 8:1-21

Sowing seed- a familiar activity to many of Jesus' followers and hearers. They knew from experience what the different outcomes were for seed that was sown- some flourished; some grew for a while and then withered some did not germinate or grow at all. Jesus used this common experience to explain the very different outcomes of receiving His teaching. It is worthy to note that many of Jesus' followers supported Him and the inner circle financially (Luke 8:3). The story/parable was told- a farmer "went out to sow his seed" (Luke 8:5), and some fell "along the path", some fell on "rocky ground", some on thorns and some on "good soil". (Luke 8:5-8). Jesus notes that the seed grown on good soil had an abundant yield "a hundred times more than was sown" (Luke 8:8). This suggests that when God's teaching and Spirit are met with a willing heart, the fruits of joy and discipleship of may are the result- this was God's plan all along- culminating in the Great Commission to "make disciples of all the world" (Matthew 28:19).Then Jesus says (in paraphrase)- Are you listening? *"Whoever has ears to hear, let them hear."* (Luke 8:8b). The disciples then want to hear the interpretation of this parable. Jesus' answer suggests that some of the interpretations of other parables may have been reserved for His closest followers: *"The knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom of God has been given to you, but to others I speak in parables, so that, "'though seeing, they may not see; though hearing, they may not understand.'* (Luke 8:10b quoting Isaiah 6:9). The essence of Jesus' teaching was clear communication, and it may seem strange that He hid some of the truth- or at least the interpretation of it, from the "crowd". Some have suggested that Jesus did this so that His words would

be remembered, memorized, and reflected on later as time permitted. He had no such luxury with His disciples- time was certainly of the essence.(http://www.gotquestions.org/Jesus-parables.html)

The meaning of this parable was explained in detail to the disciples: *"The seed is the word of God. 12 Those along the path are the ones who hear, and then the devil comes and takes away the word from their hearts, so that they may not believe and be saved. Those on the rocky ground are the ones who receive the word with joy when they hear it, but they have no root. They believe for a while, but in the time of testing they fall away. The seed that fell among thorns stands for those who hear, but as they go on their way they are choked by life's worries, riches and pleasures, and they do not mature. But the seed on good soil stands for those with a noble and good heart, who hear the word, retain it, and by persevering produce a crop." Very few of the other parables have a recorded interpretation.* (Luke 8:11b-15)

Jesus then taught about light- we need it to see, it reveals things- important things- to us. And we who follow Him and bear His name should be that to others- a source of light: *"No one lights a lamp and hides it in a clay jar or puts it under a bed. Instead, they put it on a stand, so that those who come in can see the light. For there is nothing hidden that will not be disclosed, and nothing concealed that will not be known or brought out into the open. Therefore consider carefully how you listen. Whoever has will be given more; whoever does not have, even what they think they have will be taken from them."* (Luke 8:16-18)

Then Jesus was visited by His mother and brothers. Some have argued- particularly in the Catholic tradition- that Jesus had no siblings since Mary was a "perpetual virgin". However, such passages as Matthew 13:54-57 suggest otherwise. Regardless whether the Greek word (adelphios) is rendered "brother" or "cousin", family was visiting. Jesus took the opportunity to teach that all who were present that *"My mother and brothers are those who hear God's word and put it into practice."* (Luke 8:21). Jesus certainly was not disrespecting His family- He was simply making a point about the larger Christian family!

Judges 8-9 April 2, 2014 Luke 8:22-56

Gideon was still pursuing the remainder of the Midianites. The two kings *"Zebah and Zalmunna, the kings of Midian."* (Judges 8:5) were fleeing Gideon and his 300 men. The Ephraimites were resentful that Gideon had not called them in his initial assembling of an army
Gideon's answer was very clever, and served to quell their resentments at not being choden*: "But he answered them, "What have I accomplished compared to you? Aren't the gleanings of Ephraim's grapes better than the full grape harvest of Abiezer? God gave Oreb and Zeeb, the Midianite leaders, into your hands. What was I able to do compared to you?" At this, their resentment against him subsided."* (Judges 8:2-3).

After pursuing the two kings, and exhausted from the fight, Gideon and his men crossed the Jordan and began to look for food to bolster them in their pursuit. But the people whose land he entered- the men of Sukkoth- refused this request.

Gideon had said: *"Give my troops some bread; they are worn out, and I am still pursuing Zebah and Zalmunna, the kings of Midian."(Judges 8:5). But the men of Succoth refused, angering Gideon greatly: "Just for that, when the Lord has given Zebah and Zalmunna into my hand, I will tear your flesh with desert thorns and briers." (Judges 8:7b).* Gideon then asked the men of Peniel the same thing *"but they answered as the men of Sukkoth had. So he said to the men of Peniel, "When I return in triumph, I will tear down this tower."* (Judges 8:8b-9)

The next part of this story is remarkable- Gideon and his 300 men overpowered another large army, simply because they were fighting the Lord's fight: "*Now Zebah and Zalmunna were in Karkor with a force of about fifteen thousand men, all that were left of the armies of the eastern peoples; a hundred and twenty thousand swordsmen had fallen. Gideon went up by the route of the nomads east of Nobah and Jogbehah and attacked the unsuspecting army. Zebah and Zalmunna, the two kings of Midian, fled, but he pursued them and captured them, routing their entire army."* (Judges 8:10-12) Three hundred against fifteen thousand! All conquered because of a surprise attack.

Gideon then captured a young man from Sukkoth, and demanded that he provide Gideon with the names of: *"the seventy-seven officials of Sukkoth, the elders of the town."* (Judges 8:14b) Gideon then presented the vanquished kings of Midian to the elders and leaders of Sukkoth: " Then Gideon came and said to the men of Sukkoth, *"Here are Zebah and Zalmunna, about whom you taunted me by saying, 'Do you already have the hands of Zebah and Zalmunna in your possession? Why should we give bread to your exhausted men?'" He took the elders of the town and taught the men of Sukkoth a lesson by punishing them with desert thorns and briers. He also pulled down the tower of Peniel and killed the men of the town."* (Judges 8:15-17) The violence was far from over. Gideon asked the two captured kings: "What kind of men did you kill at Tabor?" (Judges 8:18b). When Gideon heard thei answer, "men like you", he decided to kill them. He ordered his son Jether to kill the two kings, but he could not because he was "only a boy and was afraid" (Judges 8:20). So Gideon killed the two kings himself and took the "ornaments off their camels' necks" (Judges 8:21) This desire for the "trinkets" that maked the royalty of the kings could have been the first step in a lust Gideon was developing for the "things of this world" (http://www.preceptaustin.org/judges_8_commentary.htm).

Gideon was then asked to "rule over" the people- presumably as king- but he refused the people's request. (Judges 8:23). But Gideon did ask that each one of the people contribute "an earring" from their share of the plunder (Judges 8:24). From this collected precious metal Gideon fashioned an ephod. He placed the ephod in Ophrah, his hometown, and *"All Israel prostituted themselves by worshiping it there, and it became a snare to Gideon and his family."* (Judges 8:27b). Notice that the worship of this "idol" as similar to the worship of the Golden Calf in the wilderness- it was also made of jewelry- and was a "snare". God's view of this idol worship is expressed in sexual terms- it was regarded as Prostitution.

Midian was thus subdued, and there was peace in Israel with Gideon as judge for "40 years" (Judges 8:28). Gideon "went home" to live, and had seventy sons- and "many wives". Of particular interest to the story of Gideon was one of his sona-

Abimelek, who was born to one of Gideon's concubines. No sooner had Gideon died than *"the Israelites again prostituted themselves to the Baals. They set up Baal-Berith as their god and did not remember the Lord their God, who had rescued them from the hands of all their enemies on every side. They also failed to show any loyalty to the family of Jerub-Baal (that is, Gideon) in spite of all the good things he had done for them."* (Judges 8:33b-35)

Judges 9 is the horrrific story of murder and revenge centered around the evil son of Gideon-Anbimelek. (http://www.enduringword.com/commentaries/0709.htm) In this twisted and tragic story, Abimelek murders all his brothers (at the hands of hired men) except the youngest, Jotham, who escapes "by hiding" (Judges 9:5). When Jotham heard about Abimelek about to be crowned as king, he told a story- a parable of the trees:
"Listen to me, citizens of Shechem, so that God may listen to you. One day the trees went out to anoint a king for themselves. They said to the olive tree, 'Be our king.' "But the olive tree answered, 'Should I give up my oil, by which both gods and humans are honored, to hold sway over the trees?' "Next, the trees said to the fig tree, 'Come and be our king.' "But the fig tree replied, 'Should I give up my fruit, so good and sweet, to hold sway over the trees?' "Then the trees said to the vine, 'Come and be our king.' "But the vine answered, 'Should I give up my wine, which cheers both gods and humans, to hold sway over the trees?' "Finally all the trees said to the thornbush, 'Come and be our king.' "The thornbush said to the trees, 'If you really want to anoint me king over you, come and take refuge in my shade; but if not, then let fire come out of the thornbush and consume the cedars of Lebanon!'

"Have you acted honorably and in good faith by making Abimelek king? Have you been fair to Jerub-Baal and his family? Have you treated him as he deserves? Remember that my father fought for you and risked his life to rescue you from the hand of Midian. But today you have revolted against my father's family. You have murdered his seventy sons on a single stone and have made Abimelek, the son of his female slave, king over the citizens of Shechem because he is related to you. So have you acted honorably and in good faith toward Jerub-Baal and his family today? If you have, may Abimelek be your joy, and may you be his, too! But if you have not, let fire come out from Abimelek and consume you, the citizens of Shechem and Beth Millo, and let fire come out from you, the citizens of Shechem and Beth Millo, and consume Abimelek!" (Judges 9:7b-20). This story was meant to show clearly what a grievous mistake the people of Shechem had made in crowning Abimelek as king over them. Knowing that Abimelek would hear of this story, and fearing for his life, Jotham fled (Judges 9:21).

But Abimeleks' reign was not to last- because *"God stirred up animosity between Abimelek and the citizens of Shechem so that they acted treacherously against Abimelek. God did this in order that the crime against Jerub-Baal's seventy sons, the shedding of their blood, might be avenged on their brother Abimelek and on the citizens of Shechem, who had helped him murder his brothers."* (Judges 9:23b-24) Gael "son of Ebed" rose up and led his clan against Abimelek. Gael also accused Zebul, the governor of the city (sort of like a modern mayor) of being Abimelek's "deputy" (Judges 9:28). After a series of infighting maneuvers between these parties, Abimelek lays siege to a series of fortified cities. The last one was his

demise: *Next Abimelek went to Thebez and besieged it and captured it. Inside the city, however, was a strong tower, to which all the men and women—all the people of the city—had fled. They had locked themselves in and climbed up on the tower roof. Abimelek went to the tower and attacked it. But as he approached the entrance to the tower to set it on fire, a woman dropped an upper millstone on his head and cracked his skull. Hurriedly he called to his armor-bearer, "Draw your sword and kill me, so that they can't say, 'A woman killed him.'" So his servant ran him through, and he died. When the Israelites saw that Abimelek was dead, they went home."* (Judges 9:50b-55)

And the Scripture reports, *"Thus God repaid the wickedness that Abimelek had done to his father by murdering his seventy brothers. God also made the people of Shechem pay for all their wickedness. The curse of Jotham son of Jerub-Baal came on them."* (Judges 9:56b-57)

Luke 8:22-56

The water- a lake or deep river, and especially the ocean- held fear and dread for many ancient people. The fear of storms, the real fear of drowning- were terrifying realities to many in the ancient world (http://stevenmcollins.com/html/did_ancient_israel_fear_the_se.html). The boat Jesus and the disciples set out in was certainly small, and the lake (Sea of Galilee) was large. Storms often came up and fear of capsizing was real. Jesus was so untroubled by theis fear that He "fell asleep" (Luke 8:23). A sudden storm- a "squall" came up and the boat was capsizing- and the disciples feared that they might drown. But Jesus' response was truly fearless- "He got up and rebuked the wind and the raging waters; the storm subsided, and all was calm. 25 "Where is your faith?" he asked his disciples." (Luke 8:24b-25). Notice that the issue with Jesus was faith. Did His disciples really believe that God would protect and care for them, or did the ordinary fears of life have power over them? They asked themselves the question in "fear" and "amazement" : *"Who is this? He commands even the winds and the water, and they obey him."* (Luke 8:25). Jesus did have the power to literally command the wind and waves- and they marveled at it- as we would.

Jesus then travelled to a Gentile area known as the "Ten Cities" – the Gerasenes (also rendered Gadarenes or Gergesenes), also known as the Decapolis. Jesus was met by a demon possessed man who "lived in the tombs" (Luke 8:27). The demons within him cried out: "What do you want with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? I beg you, don't torture me!" (Luke 8:28b). Once again, the demonic spirits knew who Jesus was! The spirits were "many" and when Jesus demanded a name the spirits answered "Legion" (Luke 8:28). The spirits begged Jesus not to send them into the abyss (Luke 8:31). Some have suggested that the "abyss" mentioned here is synonymous with the "bottomless pit" in Revelation, into which the devil and his spirits are cast at the end of time (Rev. 9:1,2,11). Whatever the abyss is, the spirits begged to be allowed to go into a herd of pigs nearby. This is how we know that the Decapolis was Gentile- no self-respecting, law following Jew would herd pigs! Jesus gives permission to inhabit the pigs, and the "legion" of demons leave the man, go into the herd, who then rush off a cliff and drown (Luke 8:33). Word spread quickly

about these events, and the people approached Jesus and “asked Jesus to leave” out of fear (Luke 8:37). The man by now was totally transformed. Before the exorcism he was described this way: *“For a long time this man had not worn clothes or lived in a house, but had lived in the tombs”*, and the demon possession gave him strength to “break chains” that had been used to try to confine him (Luke 8:27,29). Now he was “dressed and in his right mind” (Luke 8:35). The man pleased with Jesus to take him on the return trip, but Jesus had a different plan for him : “Return home and tell how much God has done for you.” So the man went away and told all over town how much Jesus had done for him.” (Luke 8:39). How many times have we asked the Lord to do what we want or prefer, but he has a perfect plan for us that we must obediently follow.

Apparently Jesus’ travel plans were known so when He returned, the people were “expecting Him” (Luke 8:40). A synagogue leader, Jairus, had a special urgent request- his twelve year old daughter was dying. Jairus knew that Jesus could heal her, and Jesus responded. The crowd was so thick that it “almost crushed Him” (Luke 8:42). As Jesus passed through the crowd, someone “touched the edge of His cloak” (Luke 8:44). The woman who touched Jeus’ cloak had been suffering for 12 years with severe bleeding, and no one could help her! Immediately after the touch- the bleeding stopped. Jesus demanded to know who had touched Him, but the disciples answered ““Master, the people are crowding and pressing against you.” (Luke 8:45b). Translation- “It could have been anyone”! Jesus knew something had happened, since He felt power leave Him; *“Someone touched me; I know that power has gone out from me.”* (Luke 8:46). The woman knew she had been noticed, and approached Jesus “Then the woman, seeing that she could not go unnoticed, came trembling and fell at his feet. In the presence of all the people, she told why she had touched him and how she had been instantly healed.” (Luke 8:47). Then Jesus told her simply: *“Daughter, your faith has healed you. Go in peace.”* (Luke 8:48). It is important to note that Jesus attributed her healing not only to His “power” but her faith. It is through faith that we receive every good gift from God.

There was a crowd gathered at Jairus’ house. The girl had died! A report came to Jesus and Jairus: *“Your daughter is dead,” he said. “Don’t bother the teacher anymore.”* (Luke 8:49b). Jesus knew better. Just as He would later with His friend Lazarus, the power of death was one that he could overcome. Jesus told Jairus: “Don’t be afraid; just believe, and she will be healed.” (Luke 8:50). The people were “wailing and morning” for the girl, but Jesus told them:
“Stop wailing,” Jesus said. “She is not dead but asleep.” (Luke 8:52b). The people laughed at Him- surely He knew that she was dead and not just sleeping. But Jesus *“took her by the hand and said, “My child, get up!” Her spirit returned, and at once she stood up. Then Jesus told them to give her something to eat. Her parents were astonished, but he ordered them not to tell anyone what had happened.”* (Luke 8:54b-56). Several things are worthy to note about this healing: 1) it was complete and instant; 2) the power of death was broken; 3) it was done to glorify God; 4) Jesus, not wanting to draw crowds as simply a “miracle worker”, told them not to tell what had happened. My guess is that the word of this miracle spread anyway!

Map of Roman Palestine showing Gadara and Gerasa

Judges 10-11 April 3, 2014 Luke 9:1-36

Two judges then followed Gideon, both with very brief descriptions in the Scripture: Tola (Judges 10:1-2) and Jair (Judges 10:3-5). They ruled for 23 and 22 years, respectively, and then "they died" (Judges 10:2,5). What follows is the story of Jephthah, who trusted God for victory, but "hedged his bet" by offering to God the first thing out of his door that greeted him: "And Jephthah made a vow to the Lord: *"If you give the Ammonites into my hands, 31 whatever comes out of the door of my house to meet me when I return in triumph from the Ammonites will be the Lord's, and I will sacrifice it as a burnt offering."* (Judges 11:30-31) This foolish vow was made, even though "the Spirit of the Lord" was on Jephthah (Judges 11:29). Common sense might have told Jephthah that a family member- his wife or his only child- would be likely to greet him as he returned home in victory. But he was bound by his foolish oath, and was certainly heartsick when *"who should come out*

to meet him but his daughter, dancing to the sound of timbrels! She was an only child. Except for her he had neither son nor daughter." (Judges 11:34)

Scholars and ethicists have debated this quandary for years- one the one hand, Jephthah made an oath- freely given- to the Lord. His daughter- the victim of his foolish oath, even insisted to him: "My father," she replied, "you have given your word to the Lord. Do to me just as you promised, now that the Lord has avenged you of your enemies, the Ammonites." (Judges 11:36). All she asked was "two months" to "roam the hills" and "weep with her friends". On the other hand, God was never pleased with, asked or even tolerated child sacrifice. This was consistently regarded by God as one of the "detestable" practices of the pagan peoples living around Israel. One possible "out" of this dilemma is found in Jephthah's daughter's word to him after asking for two months reprieve…"I will never marry". (Judges 11:37). Some scholars believe that Jephthah could "dedicate" his daughter to the service of the Lord, and not take her life. "This view is put forward also by Christian scholars from the 14th century and continues to be propounded today, as by Solomon Landers, who considers it most likely that the fate of Jephthath's daughter was perpetual virginity or solitary confinement." (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jephthah)

Regardless of the correct interpretation of the ultimate fate of Jephthah's daughter, we find these words in Scripture: *"each year the young women of Israel go out for four days to commemorate the daughter of Jephthah the Gileadite."* (Judges 11:40) This is certainly a cautionary tale about the unintended consequences of our foolish actions, even though we do it in a "spiritual" context.

The Return of Jephtha, by Giovanni Antonio Pellegrini

Luke 9:1-36

Jesus had called the twelve, and had given them "power and authority to drive out all demons, and to cure diseases" (Luke 9:1b). And now the real test came-Jesus "sent them out to proclaim the gospel and heal the sick" (Luke 9:2). His instructions were *"Take nothing for the journey- no staff, no bag, no bread, no money, no extra shirt. Whatever house you enter, stay there until you leave that town. If people do not welcome you, leave their town and shake the dust off your feet as a testimony against them"* (Luke 9:3b-5) And so *"they sent out and went"* (Luke 9:6)- and they preached and healed people *"everywhere"* (Luke 9:6). This is how we must go when proclaiming the Good News- fully armed with the Spirit, totally dependent on Him for everything and every need.

Herod heard the news, and was puzzled and worried. Some had said that Joh the Baptist had been "raised from the dead" (Luke 9:7). Herod declared *"I beheaded John. Who, then is this I hear such things about? And he tried to see Him."* (Luke 9:9)

The disciples returned and *"reported to Jesus what they had done"* (Luke 9:10). Then they attempted to withdraw to Bethsaida, but the "crowds learned about it and followed Him." (Luke 9:11). Jesus then *"welcomed them and spoke to them about the Kingdom of God, and healed those who needed healing"* (Luke 9:11b). Jesus didn't merely speak about the Kingdom, He actively ushered it in with acts of grace and mercy! It was late in the afternoon, and "the Twelve came to Him and said *"Send the crowd away so they can go to the surrounding villages and countryside and find food and lodging, because we are in a remote place here"* (Luke 9:12). Jesus then startles them by saying *"You give them something to eat"* (Luke 9:10). What a surprise and a challenge. Didn't Jesus understand the situation…didn't He see the enormity of the crowd? Five thousand men- not counting women and children were tired and hungry! But to Jesus, the "remote place" and lack of obvious provisions was not a problem. He had a plan- *"have them sit down in groups of about fifty each"* (Luke 9:14b). And then *"taking the five loaves and the two fish and looking up to heaven, He gave thanks and broke them. Then he gave them to the disciples to distribute to the people. They all ate and were satisfied, and the disciples picked up twelve basketfuls of broken pieces that were left over"* (Luke 9:16-17). Are you hungry today? Do you want for anything? Ask the Master who fed the five thousand, and He will fill you and satisfy you!

The Question…the subject of the second sermon I ever preached- "Who do you say that I am?" (Luke 9:20). Just before that, Jesus asked "Who do the crowds say I am?". I'm not sure that Jesus really was concerned about "the crowds" and their opinion, but he was setting up what I am sure He hoped was a contrast between the opinion of those who knew Him casually or occasionally and those with whom He was sharing His life. The Peter gives "The Answer"- "God's Messiah" (Luke 9:20b). Jesus then warned them "not to tell anyone" (Luke 9:21), and then proceeded to add this prophetic prediction" "The Son of Man must suffer many things…." (Luke 9:22). Then He turned to "them all" and described in detail the cost of true discipleship: *"Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves, take up their cross daily, and follow me".* Notice the three parts of this description: 1) put Him first- deny ourselves- and most pointedly, our wills- which are ever on "our throne"; 2) take up your cross- each of us has a sorrow, a grief, a besetting issue (like Paul did later) which we must deal with and endure with His grace; 3) follow Him!

Then Jesus gives us the secret to life: *"Whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for Me will save it. What good is it for someone to gain the whole world, and yet lose or forfeit their very self?"* (Luke 9:24-25). We must. Like the seeds that enter the ground, die to "self" and then we can flourish and grow. Like the caterpillar that "dies" as a chrysalis- we then become a beautiful butterfly- the true self that God sees and wants us to become!

Jesus makes a promise to those listening "Truly I tell you, some who are standing here will not taste death before they see the Kingdom of God" (Luke 9:27). Believers and unbelievers have wrestled with this text- which seems on the surface to be impossible. Surely the very Kingdom of God didn't come in the first century! Yet just as Jesus' long-prophesied role as the King of Israel and Lion of Judah were seemingly contradicted by His death by crucifixion, the real truth was that Jesus is the King of Kings, and the Kingdom of God did come just as He predicted. In Acts 2

we see the dramatic fulfillment of this prophesy- the Spirit of God was given to "many" and not just the very few, and the power and glory of God were available to all believers. And by the way, Jesus is coming- again- just a He promised!

Soon after, Jesus took three of His inner circle of disciples- John, James and Peter, with Him to go up "onto a mountain to pray" (Luke 9:28). While Jesus was praying, an amazing thing happened: "the appearance of His face changed, and his clothes became as bright as a flash of lightning" (Luke 9:29). Two men appeared with Him- Moses and Elijah "in glorious splendor, talking with Jesus" (Luke 9:30). Peter and his companions were sleepy, but "when they became fully awake, they saw His glory and the two men standing with Him" (Luke 9:32). Peter- always the impulsive one- said "Master, it is good for us to be here. Let us put up three shelters- one for you, and one for Moses and one for Elijah" (Luke 9:33). But while Peter was speaking, a *"cloud appeared and covered them, and they were afraid as they entered the cloud. A voice came from the cloud saying "This is My Son, Whom I have chosen, listen to Him'"* (Luke 9:35). After hearing the voice, *"they found that Jesus was alone"* and they *"did not tell anyone at that time what they had seen"* (Luke 9:36).

One very compelling commentary on the Transfiguration is as follows: "Undoubtedly, the purpose of the transfiguration of Christ into at least a part of His heavenly glory was so that the "inner circle" of His disciples could gain a greater understanding of who Jesus was. Christ underwent a dramatic change in appearance in order that the disciples could behold Him in His glory. The disciples, who had only known Him in His human body, now had a greater realization of the deity of Christ, though they could not fully comprehend it. That gave them the reassurance they needed after hearing the shocking news of His coming death.

Symbolically, the appearance of Moses and Elijah represented the Law and the Prophets. But God's voice from heaven – "Listen to Him!" - clearly showed that the Law and the Prophets must give way to Jesus. The One who is the new and living way is replacing the old – He is the fulfillment of the Law and the countless prophecies in the Old Testament. Also, in His glorified form they saw a preview of His coming glorification and enthronement as King of kings and Lord of lords." (http://www.gotquestions.org/transfiguration.html#ixzz2xYkMiAbF)

http://zionhears.blogspot.com/2014/02/time-in-word-transfiguration.html

Judges 12-14 April 4, 2014 Luke 9:37-62

Now the Ephraimites, perhaps out of jealousy or feeling "left out" challenged Jephthah about being left out of the victorious campaign against the Ammonites. They were so angry they threatened to "burn down your house over your head." (Judges 12:1b). Jephthah's answer was very straightforward, and may have angered them even more*: "I and my people were engaged in a great struggle with the Ammonites, and although I called, you didn't save me out of their hands. When I saw that you wouldn't help, I took my life in my hands and crossed over to fight the Ammonites, and the Lord gave me the victory over them. Now why have you come up today to fight me?"* (Judges 12:2b-3) And. Seemingly inevitable, there was war. This time the war was among the tribes of Israel- the men of Gilead against the Ephraimites, and there was a brutal struggle. Military historians often point out his conflict as important, since one of the strategies of the Gileadites was to ask for a password that only their tribe could pronounce correctly: *The Gileadites captured the fords of the Jordan leading to Ephraim, and whenever a survivor of Ephraim said, "Let me cross over," the men of Gilead asked him, "Are you an Ephraimite?" If he replied, "No," they said, "All right, say 'Shibboleth.'" If he said, "Sibboleth," because he could not pronounce the word correctly, they seized him and killed him at the fords of the Jordan. Forty-two thousand Ephraimites were killed at that time."* (Judges 12:5b-6) Jephthah then rules Israel for six years, then he died and was buried in Gilead.

Following Jephthah there were three judges, each of which ruled for a short time: Izban of Bethlehem (Judges 12:8-10); Elon the Zebulonite (Judges 12:11-12); and Abdon son of Hillel, who had "forty sons and thirty grandsons, who rode on seventy donkeys" (Judges 12:13-15).

We then come to a "giant" among the Judges- Samson. He is perhaps one of the most studies tragic figures in the Old Testament Scriptures. School children are taught at least some of the stories, and artists over the world have been inspired to paint scenes depicting his colorful and tragic life. Samson came at a time when the Philistines had ruled over Israel for forty years, again because the Israelites "did evil in the eyes of the Lord" (Judges 13:1).

Some of the elements of Samson's birth sound familiar- a righteous couple is childless, and they ask God for a child. An angel visits the mother, and tells her she is to have a child who will be a deliverer of Israel: *"The angel of the Lord appeared to her and said, "You are barren and childless, but you are going to become pregnant and give birth to a son. Now see to it that you drink no wine or other fermented drink and that you do not eat anything unclean. You will become pregnant and have a son whose head is never to be touched by a razor because the boy is to be a Nazirite, dedicated to God from the womb. He will take the lead in delivering Israel from the hands of the Philistines."* (Judges 13:3-5). She tells her husband Manoah: *"A man of God came to me. He looked like an angel of God, very awesome. I didn't ask him where he came from, and he didn't tell me his name. But he said to me, 'You will become pregnant and have a son. Now then, drink no wine or other fermented drink and do not eat anything unclean, because the boy will be a Nazirite of God from the womb until the day of his death.'"* (Judges 13:6b-7) It was very unusual for a person the be a Nazirite for life. Most often, a person took the vow of a Nazirite for a specific and limited time (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nazirite). Manoah humbly asked the Lord to help him understand: *"Pardon your servant, Lord. I beg you to let the man of God you sent to us come again to teach us how to bring up the boy who is to be born."* (Judges 13:8b). Notice both Manoah's humility and his willingness to follow God's directions for raising this son!

Then God sent the same angle- to Manoah's wife- while she was in the field. She hurried ti=o he husband and exclaimed: *"He's here! The man who appeared to me the other day!"* (Judges 13:10b) Once Manoah establishes that this is, indeed, the same "man" who appeared to his wife, he receives the same instructions from the angel: *"Your wife must do all that I have told her. She must not eat anything that comes from the grapevine, nor drink any wine or other fermented drink nor eat anything unclean. She must do everything I have commanded her."* (Judges 13:13b-14). Manoah asks the "man" to stay, and offers him a meal made from a young goat. The angel refuses, and tells Manoah to sacrifice the animal to the Lord. After being asked his name the angel makes an unexpected reply: *"Why do you ask my name? It is beyond understanding."* (Judges 13:18b). As Manoah and his wife (who is nameless in this story) watch the flame from the sacrifice, the angel of the Lord *"ascended in the flame"* and they realized this was an *"angel of the Lord"*. They feared for their lives (Exodus 33:20) since it was written that no one could "look at God and live". (Judges 13:20-22). Manoah's wife answers, showing great common

sense: “If the Lord had meant to kill us, he would not have accepted a burnt offering and grain offering from our hands, nor shown us all these things or now told us this.” (Judges 13:23b). And the boy was born , and the *“Spirit of the Lord began to stir him”.* (Judges 13:25) This anointing was to be the source of all of Samson’s strength for his entire life!

Samson was impulsive and somewhat reckless. He went to Timnah and *“saw there a young Philistine woman”*, and he told his parent to *“get her for me as my wife”* (Judges 14:1-2). This was wrong on so many levels- 1) the impulsiveness of a young man to “see and marry” almost at once; 2) the selection of a woman that was not of the nation of Israel, but a pagan Philistine. His parents, as so many do, tried to reason with him and direct him to one of God’s people:
“Isn’t there an acceptable woman among your relatives or among all our people? Must you go to the uncircumcised Philistines to get a wife?” (Judges 14:3b) But Samson was insistent: *“Get her for me. She’s the right one for me.” 4 (His parents did not know that this was from the Lord, who was seeking an occasion to confront the Philistines; for at that time they were ruling over Israel.)* (Judges 14:3-4). Notice that God was using Samson’s disobedience to accomplish a greater good- the confrontation of the Philistines.

So Samson and his parents went together to Timnah to meet with the girl he had been so attracted to. And in a vineyard near Timnah: “*suddenly a young lion came roaring toward him. 6 The Spirit of the Lord came powerfully upon him so that he tore the lion apart with his bare hands as he might have torn a young goat.”* (Judges 14:5b-6). He did not tell his parents about this, and afterward he went to talk with the young woman and “liked her’ (Judges 14:6b-7).

Some time later, Samson returned to marry the girl and *“when he went back to marry her, he turned aside to look at the lion’s carcass, and in it he saw a swarm of bees and some honey. He scooped out the honey with his hands and ate as he went along. When he rejoined his parents, he gave them some, and they too ate it. But he did not tell them that he had taken the honey from the lion’s carcass.”* (Judges 14:8b-9) And the story continues, as Samson sees and opportunity to win a bet with the Philistines: *Now his father went down to see the woman. And there Samson held a feast, as was customary for young men. When the people saw him, they chose thirty men to be his companions. “Let me tell you a riddle,” Samson said to them. “If you can give me the answer within the seven days of the feast, I will give you thirty linen garments and thirty sets of clothes. If you can’t tell me the answer, you must give me thirty linen garments and thirty sets of clothes.” “Tell us your riddle,” they said. “Let’s hear it.” He replied, “Out of the eater, something to eat; out of the strong, something sweet.”*
For three days they could not give the answer.” (Judges 14:10b-14) Since the Philistines couldn’t figure out the riddle, they decided to “cheat” and ask Samson’s “betrothed” to get the information from him. After all, why wouldn’t Samson tell his bride-to-be the answer? The man said: *“Coax your husband into explaining the riddle for us, or we will burn you and your father’s household to death. Did you invite us here to steal our property?”* (Judges 14:15b). The woman tried one of the oldest “tricks in the book”- she cried for seven days- during the pre-marriage feast. *“You hate me! You don’t really love me. You’ve given my people a riddle, but you*

haven't told me the answer." "I haven't even explained it to my father or mother," he replied, "so why should I explain it to you?" She cried the whole seven days of the feast. So on the seventh day he finally told her, because she continued to press him. She in turn explained the riddle to her people". (Judges 14:16b-17). The man in the wedding party then presented Samson with the answer: *"What is sweeter than honey? What is stronger than a lion?"* (Judges 14:18) Samson was outraged that his bride-to-be had tricked him, and he said angrily: *"If you had not plowed with my heifer, you would not have solved my riddle."* (Judges 14:18). And the "Spirit of the Lord" came on Sampson, and he got his revenge: *Then the Spirit of the LORD came powerfully upon him. He went down to Ashkelon, struck down thirty of their men, stripped them of everything and gave their clothes to those who had explained the riddle. Burning with anger, he returned to his father's home. And Samson's wife was given to one of his companions who had attended him at the feast.* (Judges 14:19-20). Notice that he got revenge (at least in part) but not "the girl"!

Luke 9:37-62

Jesus then heals a "demon possessed boy" (Luke 9:37-43). The pattern was familiar. A *"large crowd"* approached Jesus, and a father begged Jesus to heal his son: *"Teacher, I beg you to look at my son, for he is my only child. A spirit seizes him and he suddenly screams; it throws him into convulsions so that he foams at the mouth. It scarcely ever leaves him and is destroying him. I begged your disciples to drive it out, but they could not."* (Luke 9:37b-40) The father clearly believed that Jesus could help him, and had asked Jesus' disciples to cast out the demon, but they had failed. Perhaps they failed because, as Jesus had said to them earlier "this kind requires much prayer (and fasting)" (Mark 9:29; Matthew 17:21). Jesus was frustrated- perhaps with the whole situation, perhaps with his disciples who one day were strong, the next weak, and He said: *"You unbelieving and perverse generation," Jesus replied, "how long shall I stay with you and put up with you? Bring your son here."* (Luke 9:41) And then Jesus cast the demon out, and *"healed the boy and gave him back to his father. And they were all amazed at the greatness of God."* (Luke 9:42b-43) It is important to note that this miracle, like the others was primarily performed to bring glory to God.

Two things then happen that are both remarkable. Jesus tells His disciples- a second time_ that He "is going to be delivered into the hands of men." (Luke 9:44b). The Scripture says clearly: "*they did not understand what this meant. It was hidden from them, so that they did not grasp it, and they were afraid to ask him about it."* (Luke 9:45) They both did not understand what Jesus said (it was "hidden" from them) and they did not ask (probably since they knew instinctively that they wouldn't get and answer that they liked!). The disciples then- wrongly- were in a discussion about who would be "greatest"- again, they were assuming an earthly kingdom with Jesus as the head and themselves in power with Him. This was the "script" about the Messiah that they had believed from the teachings of Scripture. Jesus "knew their thoughts"- probably not by ESP but by discernment from the Holy Spirit- and decided to set them straight: *"Jesus, knowing their thoughts, took a little child and had him stand beside him. Then he said to them, "Whoever welcomes this little child in my name welcomes me; and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent*

me. For it is the one who is least among you all who is the greatest." (Luke 9:47-48) The simple and trusting spirit of a "little child" was the example Jesus wanted them to see- God would receive them the same way, and was not interested in their "politics". Then a report came of one who was *"driving out demons"* in Jesus' name. Jesus tells them *"Do not stop him"*, because *"whoever is not against you is for you"* (Luke 9:49-50)

The Samaritans were regarded by many Jews as the "worst of the worst". They were only part Jewish- the product of intermarriage outside the tribes of Israel that God had forbidden them to do. (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Samaritans). Luke 9:51 states very ominously "As the time approached for him to be taken up to heaven, Jesus resolutely set out for Jerusalem." (Luke 9:51). Along the way they encountered a *"Samaritan village"* where the disciples sought *to "get things ready for Him"* (Luke 9:52), but the *"the people there did not welcome Him, because He was headed for Jerusalem"* (Luke 9:53). It is probable that the Samaritans did not welcome Jesus because he was headed for the capital of the "Judean Jews"- Jerusalem- and not to temple at Mount Gerizim, the center of worship for the Samaritans. The disciples were furious with this rejection of Jesus, and they asked of Jesus: *"Lord, do you want us to call fire down from heaven to destroy them?" But Jesus turned and rebuked them. Then he and his disciples went to another village.* (Luke 9:54b-56) Jesus had no particular quarrel with the Samaritans, speaking publicly with a Samaritan woman, and holding up the "good Samaritan" as an example of true love and charity. He decided to simply go on another route to Jerusalem, and rebuked His disciples for their unwarranted display of anger.

On the road, several would-be disciples approached Jesus- each wanting to "follow" Him. The first said: "I will follow you wherever you go." And Jesus' reply was ""Foxes have dens and birds have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head." (Luke 9:57-58). A second man was approached by Jesus: *"Follow me."* And his reply was *"Lord, first let me go and bury my father." Jesus said to him, "Let the dead bury their own dead, but you go and proclaim the kingdom of God."* (Luke 9:59b-60) Another who was intending to follow Jesus said:
"I will follow you, Lord; but first let me go back and say goodbye to my family." (Luke 9:61). Jesus reply was: "No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for service in the kingdom of God." (Luke 9:62).

This is a passage I had the privilege of preaching on recently (December 2013). The emphasis of the sermon was "Don't Look Back". If you plow a field, and "look back", you will not create a straight furrow, but a crooked one- the job can't be done properly while "looking back" (Not as bad as "texting while driving", but not a good outcome either way!). We also can't look back at our live- in regret, in anger, in "wishing for the good old days"- but we must look forward to Him who holds the future!

Judges 15-17 April 5, 2014 Luke 10:1-24

Vengeance- a motive as old as mankind itself. The Scripture presents people and their actions and motives, both admirable and detestable, in the same detail. In the story of Samson, we often see the tragic misuse of the "Spirit of God" in a person who was impulsive and self-centered. So we can safely say that establishing that a person is Spirit filled (assuming it's the Holy Spirit and not a spirit of evil) does not guarantee good or moral behavior. Samson wanted revenge for the trickery of the Philistines- so he quickly went about getting it! He said: *"This time I have a right to get even with the Philistines; I will really harm them." So he went out and caught three hundred foxes and tied them tail to tail in pairs. He then fastened a torch to every pair of tails, lit the torches and let the foxes loose in the standing grain of the Philistines. He burned up the shocks and standing grain, together with the vineyards and olive groves."* (Judges 15:3b-5) The Philistines wanted to know the perpetrator of this outrageous act: *"Who did this?" they were told, "Samson, the Timnite's son-in-law, because his wife was given to his companion."* (Judges 15:6b). *The Philistines were swift to strike back: So the Philistines went up and burned her and her father to death. Samson said to them, "Since you've acted like this, I swear that I won't stop until I get my revenge on you." He attacked them viciously and slaughtered many of them. Then he went down and stayed in a cave in the rock of Etam."* (Judges 15:6b-8). And so the cycle of retribution and revenge starts. Samson believed that he was more powerful and cunning than any enemy, so he acted as if he were immortal (and sometimes was immoral as well!).

There is usually a "ripple effect" after a violent act takes place, and usually collateral damage. In this case, the "men of Judah" were threatened by the presence of the vengeful Philistines. They believed that they would be caught up in the battle between Samson and the Philistines. So they offered to capture Samson for the Philistines, and thus avoid destruction of their own tribe: "*The people of Judah asked, "Why have you come to fight us?" "We have come to take Samson prisoner," they answered, "to do to him as he did to us." Then three thousand men from Judah went down to the cave in the rock of Etam and said to Samson, "Don't you realize that the Philistines are rulers over us? What have you done to us?" He answered, "I merely did to them what they did to me." They said to him, "We've*

come to tie you up and hand you over to the Philistines." Samson said, "Swear to me that you won't kill me yourselves." "Agreed," they answered. "We will only tie you up and hand you over to them. We will not kill you." So they bound him with two new ropes and led him up from the rock. As he approached Lehi, the Philistines came toward him shouting." (Judges 15:10-14). Now Samson had to act- and the "Spirit of the Lord" came upon him, and he burst out of the ropes binding him and *"Finding a fresh jawbone of a donkey, he grabbed it and struck down a thousand men."* (Judges 15:15)

Samson cried out in triumph over his enemies- and the enemies of God:
Then Samson said:

"With a donkey's jawbone
I have made donkeys of them.
With a donkey's jawbone
I have killed a thousand men."
When he finished speaking, he threw away the jawbone; and the place was called Ramath Lehi." (Judges 15:16-17).
The phrase Ramath Lehi is translated "Jawbone Hill". The Samson was thirsty from his bout with the Philistines, and complained to God: *"You have given your servant this great victory. Must I now die of thirst and fall into the hands of the uncircumcised?" Then God opened up the hollow place in Lehi, and water came out of it. When Samson drank, his strength returned and he revived. So the spring was called En Hakkore, and it is still there in Lehi."* (Judges 15:18b-19). And the Scripture states that Samson ruled over Israel "twenty years" in the "days of the Philistines" (Judges 15:20). The name En Hakkore means "Caller's Spring". Note the strange mixture of reverence and irreverence for God- at one point Samson refers to himself as "your servant" and at the same time makes demands as an entitled, spoiled child. Despite his personality flaws and attitudes of entitlement, God allowed him to rule in Israel.

So the Philistines plotted to get even with Samson and kill him if they could. One day Samson went to Gaza, and spent the night with a prostitute there. The Philistines saw their opportunity: *But Samson lay there only until the middle of the night. Then he got up and took hold of the doors of the city gate, together with the two posts, and tore them loose, bar and all. He lifted them to his shoulders and carried them to the top of the hill that faces Hebron.* (Judges 16:3)
Samson then met and fell in love with a lovely Philistine named Delilah, who lived in the Valley of Sorek (Judges 16:4). They developed a plan where Delilah would held them capture Samson: *"See if you can lure him into showing you the secret of his great strength and how we can overpower him so we may tie him up and subdue him. Each one of us will give you eleven hundred shekels of silver."* (Judges 16:5b)
So Delilah set out to trick Samson into revealing his secret. The first round went like this: *Tell me the secret of your great strength and how you can be tied up and subdued." Samson answered her, "If anyone ties me with seven fresh bowstrings that have not been dried, I'll become as weak as any other man."* (Judges 16:6b-7).
Then she tested the "secret": *"With men hidden in the room, she called to him, "Samson, the Philistines are upon you!" But he snapped the bowstrings as easily as a piece of string snaps when it comes close to a flame. So the secret of his strength*

was not discovered." (Judges 16:9) Round two of the trickery and deception was a repeat of round 1: *"If anyone ties me securely with new ropes that have never been used, I'll become as weak as any other man." So Delilah took new ropes and tied him with them. Then, with men hidden in the room, she called to him, "Samson, the Philistines are upon you!" But he snapped the ropes off his arms as if they were threads.* (Judges 16:11b-12) Round three was similar to the first two: *"All this time you have been making a fool of me and lying to me. Tell me how you can be tied." He replied, "If you weave the seven braids of my head into the fabric on the loom and tighten it with the pin, I'll become as weak as any other man." So while he was sleeping, Delilah took the seven braids of his head, wove them into the fabric and tightened it with the pin. Again she called to him, "Samson, the Philistines are upon you!" He awoke from his sleep and pulled up the pin and the loom, with the fabric.* (Judges 16:13b-14) When simple deception didn't work, she tried constantly nagging Samson: *"With such nagging she prodded him day after day until he was sick to death of it."* She knew that her woman's charms and devices would eventually wear him down, and she was right. So he told her everything. *"No razor has ever been used on my head," he said, "because I have been a Nazirite dedicated to God from my mother's womb. If my head were shaved, my strength would leave me, and I would become as weak as any other man." When Delilah saw that he had told her everything, she sent word to the rulers of the Philistines, "Come back once more; he has told me everything." So the rulers of the Philistines returned with the silver in their hands. After putting him to sleep on her lap, she called for someone to shave off the seven braids of his hair, and so began to subdue him. And his strength left him.*

Then she called, "Samson, the Philistines are upon you!" He awoke from his sleep and thought, "I'll go out as before and shake myself free." But he did not know that the Lord had left him." He had now made his fatal mistake- he trusted the untrustworthy and thought his desire was more important than his obedience to God and his lifetime vows. The treatment of Samson by the Philistines is shocking to modern readers, but was not unusual cruelty in that age: *"The Philistines seized him, gouged out his eyes and took him down to Gaza. Binding him with bronze shackles, they set him to grinding grain in the prison. But the hair on his head began to grow again after it had been shaved."* (Judges 16:21b-22) Then the Philistines made their fatal mistake. Out of their pride at capturing their enemy, they worshipped their pagan god Dagon and made fun of the blinded Samson: Now the rulers of the Philistines assembled to offer a great sacrifice to Dagon their god and to celebrate, saying, *"Our god has delivered Samson, our enemy, into our hands." When the people saw him, they praised their god, saying,*

"Our god has delivered our enemy
into our hands,
the one who laid waste our land
and multiplied our slain."
While they were in high spirits, they shouted, "Bring out Samson to entertain us." So they called Samson out of the prison, and he performed for them. (Judges 16:23-25)

They had ignored two things- 1) the hair on his head had grown back; and more importantly, 2) God will not be mocked- He gave Samson his strength back for one

last judgment on the pagan captors. Samson prayed for restoration of his great strength, and the request was granted: *“Sovereign Lord, remember me. Please, God, strengthen me just once more, and let me with one blow get revenge on the Philistines for my two eyes.” 29 Then Samson reached toward the two central pillars on which the temple stood. Bracing himself against them, his right hand on the one and his left hand on the other, 30 Samson said, “Let me die with the Philistines!” Then he pushed with all his might, and down came the temple on the rulers and all the people in it. Thus he killed many more when he died than while he lived*. (Judges 16_28b-30)

Then Samson was buried in the tomb of Manoah his father, and Samson had ruled in Israel “twenty years” (Judges 16:31).

We then explore the story of Micah, who we first see as returning *“eleven hundred shekels of silver”* to his mother, from whom he had taken them. His mother promised that she would have a craftsman make: *“an image overlaid with silver.”* (Judges 17:1-4) out of two hundred of the silver shekels. So an idol was manufactured, and Micah kept the idol in his house. The idolatry gets even worse: *“Now this man Micah had a shrine, and he made an ephod and some household gods and installed one of his sons as his priest. 6 In those days Israel had no king; everyone did as they saw fit.”* (Judges 17:5-6) Notice that everyone did as they saw fit…sort of like this modern age- where man himself sets up the standards, and refuses to determine morality from the standards of Scripture! Micah even enlisted a priest- a Levite- to be his “private priest” and he was bold enough to thank God for His goodness in providing “what Micah wanted” How easy it is to praise and follow God when things are well with us- how problematic and difficult when things are “not so well” with us! The Scripture tells us: *A young Levite from Bethlehem in Judah, who had been living within the clan of Judah left that town in search of some other place to stay. On his way he came to Micah’s house in the hill country of Ephraim. Micah asked him, “Where are you from?” “I’m a Levite from Bethlehem in Judah,” he said, “and I’m looking for a place to stay.” Then Micah said to him, “Live with me and be my father and priest, and I’ll give you ten shekels[1] of silver a year, your clothes and your food.” So the Levite agreed to live with him, and the young man became like one of his sons to him. Then Micah installed the Levite, and the young man became his priest and lived in his house. And Micah said, “Now I know that the LORD will be good to me, since this Levite has become my priest.”* (Judges 17:7-13)

Samson destroying a pagan temple.

Luke 10:1-24

In Luke 9, we see the story of Jesus sending out "the twelve"- the innermost circle of followers. They enjoyed great success in teaching, preaching and healing. Now Jesus had a larger mission- this time with "seventy two". There are similarities in the two accounts: 1) the disciples were to go out in twos; 2) they were not to take anything "extra"- a "purse (money) or sandals (presumably extra ones); 3) they were to stay at one house and not move around from house to house; 4) they were to leave if rejected- and realize that it was Jesus that was being rejected and not them personally. (Luke 10:1-12). In Luke 10 we see the mention of the fate of those who reject the Good News- "*it will be more bearable on that day for Sodom than for that town."* (Luke 10:12b)

Jesus then pronounces "woes" on those who refused to believe or have faith- *"Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! For if the miracles that were performed in you had been performed in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago, sitting in sackcloth and ashes. But it will be more bearable for Tyre and Sidon at the judgment than for you. And you, Capernaum, will you be lifted to the heavens? No, you will go down to Hades.*

"Whoever listens to you listens to me; whoever rejects you rejects me; but whoever rejects me rejects him who sent me." (Luke 10:13-16). The mission was successful!

The disciples said on their return: “Lord, even the demons submit to us in your name.” (Luke 10:17b). The Jesus describes His view of what was happening as the Good News was beginning to spread, one life and one heart at a time: He replied*, “I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven. I have given you authority to trample on snakes and scorpions and to overcome all the power of the enemy; nothing will harm you. However, do not rejoice that the spirits submit to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven.”* (Luke 10:18b-20). Notice the clear emphasis- not that they were “successful” but that by being obedient and trusting God their names were “written in Heaven”!

And Jesus’ joy is complete- His Father’s plan- making disciples who then make more disciples- is working and bearing fruit. *“At that time Jesus, full of joy through the Holy Spirit, said, “I praise you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and learned, and revealed them to little children. Yes, Father, for this is what you were pleased to do. “All things have been committed to me by my Father. No one knows who the Son is except the Father, and no one knows who the Father is except the Son and those to whom the Son chooses to reveal him.”Then he turned to his disciples and said privately, “Blessed are the eyes that see what you see. For I tell you that many prophets and kings wanted to see what you see but did not see it, and to hear what you hear but did not hear it.”* (Luke 10:21-24)

Judges 18-19 April 6, 2014 Luke 10:25-42

Judges 18 starts with these words: *“In those days Israel had no king.”* (Judges 18:1). The simple statement has a number of important implications- political and spiritual. From the political point of view, Israel functioned as a series of semi-autonomous tribes- each with their own lands and tribal leaders. They would have difficulty against a larger opponent or enemy, and so their security was tenuous at best. Spiritually, the fact that there was not a central voice for God- except, of course, for the judges- made the deterioration of tue worship and morality inevitable. The Danites, who had *“not yet come into an inheritance among the tribes of Israel.”* (Judges 18:1) are the subject of this chapter of Judges. So the Danites sent: *“five of their leading men from Zorah and Eshtaol to spy out the land and explore it. These men represented all the Danites. They told them, “Go, explore the land.”*(Judges 18:2b).

Remember Micah, who had retained a “private priest” to serve his household? The Danite spies found him in Micah’s home in Ephraim, and “recognized his voice” It is not clear to me at all why they would have recognized him. Another thing to ask in heaven, I guess. The Danite spies asked the priest *“Who brought you here? What are you doing in this place? Why are you here?”* (Judges 18:3b). At first they only asked the priest for blessing for their journey and mission: Then they said to him, *“Please inquire of God to learn whether our journey will be successful.” The priest answered them, “Go in peace. Your journey has the Lord’s approval.” (Judges 18:5-6). The spies then went to Laish, where they found a people at peace in a prosperous land. “So the five men left and came to Laish, where they saw that the people were living in safety, like the Sidonians, at peace and secure. And since their land lacked nothing, they were prosperous. Also, they lived a long way from the*

Sidonians and had no relationship with anyone else." (Judges 18:7). As far as these Danite spies were concerned the people of Laish were ripe for attack- they were too far away from potential help to effectively defend themselves. When the five spies returned to the other Danites, they were asked what they found and what they would recommend. Their report was: They answered, *"Come on, let's attack them! We have seen the land, and it is very good. Aren't you going to do something? Don't hesitate to go there and take it over. When you get there, you will find an unsuspecting people and a spacious land that God has put into your hands, a land that lacks nothing whatever."* (Judges 18:9-10). They then sent out "six hundred men" armed for battle, and the first place they went was to Micah's house. They decide to loot the house and take the priest with them: *The six hundred Danites, armed for battle, stood at the entrance of the gate. The five men who had spied out the land went inside and took the idol, the ephod and the household gods while the priest and the six hundred armed men stood at the entrance of the gate.* ***18*** *When the five men went into Micah's house and took the idol, the ephod and the household gods, the priest said to them, "What are you doing?"They answered him, "Be quiet! Don't say a word. Come with us, and be our father and priest. Isn't it better that you serve a tribe and clan in Israel as priest rather than just one man's household?" The priest was very pleased.* (Judges 18:16b-20). How could this have happened? A "man of God" tacitly approves of looting, and agres to what amounts to kidnapping. We have a clue earlier in the story when the priest agreed to serve a single household- ostensibly for money, room and board. And we see from the Scripture that he was "pleased" with the new situation. As Goeffrey Chaucer once said in the Canterbury Tales about the corrupt priest: ". . . if gold rust, what then will iron do? For if a priest be foul in whom we trust/ No wonder that a common man should rust. . . .".

The call went out to the men living "near Micah" to catch the Danites, but they soon realized they were overmatched. The Danites told the pursuing Micah *"Don't argue with us, or some of the men may get angry and attack you, and you and your family will lose your lives." So the Danites went their way, and Micah, seeing that they were too strong for him, turned around and went back home." So the Danites took the city of Laish, burned it, rebuilt it and renamed it "Dan". And the Danites: "set up for themselves the idol, and Jonathan son of Gershom, the son of Moses, and his sons were priests for the tribe of Dan until the time of the captivity of the land. 31 They continued to use the idol Micah had made, all the time the house of God was in Shiloh."* (Judges 18:30b-31). So the people turned to idols, corrupted the function and morality of the priesthood, and lived as if their own judgment was the final authority…they "did what seemed right in their eyes" (Judges 17:6).

Judges 19 begins with the same words as Judges 18, and sets the tone for the horrific story that follows. The story is about a Levite who *"took a concubine from Bethlehem in Judah."* (Judges 19:1). She was unfaithful to him, left him and went to her parents' home in Bethlehem. The Levite pursued her and persuaded her to return (Judges 19:2-5). On the return trip they were near the end of the day, but did not wish to stay among the Jebusites- despite the urging of the servant traveling with him. The Levite replied: *"No. We won't go into any city whose people are not Israelites. We will go on to Gibeah." He added, "Come, let's try to reach Gibeah or Ramah and spend the night in one of those places." So they went on, and the sun set as they neared Gibeah in Benjamin."* (Judges 19:12b-14). They found

themselves in the city square, with no one to take them in for the night, when a kind *"old man from the hill country of Ephraim"* (Judges 19:16) took them in for the night. This man showed hospitality typical of so many in this desert region-a stranger is often welcomed into the home to shelter them from the hostile desert climate*. "You are welcome at my house," the old man said. "Let me supply whatever you need. Only don't spend the night in the square." So he took him into his house and fed his donkeys. After they had washed their feet, they had something to eat and drink."* (Judges 19:20b-21).

Then the story takes a very ugly turn: *"While they were enjoying themselves, some of the wicked men of the city surrounded the house. Pounding on the door, they shouted to the old man who owned the house, "Bring out the man who came to your house so we can have sex with him."* (Judges 19:22). They were offered the concubine and the man's "virgin daughter" to
"use them and do to them whatever you wish. But as for this man, don't do such an outrageous thing." (Judges 19:24b). The vicious behavior continues: *"But the men would not listen to him. So the man took his concubine and sent her outside to them, and they raped her and abused her throughout the night, and at dawn they let her go. At daybreak the woman went back to the house where her master was staying, fell down at the door and lay there until daylight."* (Judges 19:25-26). The master found the concubine dead outside his door: *"When her master got up in the morning and opened the door of the house and stepped out to continue on his way, there lay his concubine, fallen in the doorway of the house, with her hands on the threshold. 28 He said to her, "Get up; let's go." But there was no answer. Then the man put her on his donkey and set out for home."* (Judges 19:28) Then as a gruesome message to the twelve tribes of Israel, he *"took a knife and cut up his concubine, limb by limb, into twelve parts and sent them into all the areas of Israel."* (Judges 19:29). The response was, thankfully, outrage at such an act. There was at least a vestige of humanity and morality left among some of God's people, even in this dark time of lust and lawlessness. (Judges 19:30).

Luke 10:25-42

What does the Law mean? What does the Law require? Is the "attitude of our hearts" as important as the "obedience to the letter"? I remember the story of the young girl who insisted on standing up in class. She was ordered to "sit down". After a few rounds of successively more insistent and threatening commands, she finally sat down but defiantly proclaimed "In my heart I'm standing up!". God, who sees our hearts and motives, does actually expect us to change, and allow Him to change our hearts to be closer and closer to His. Jesus was challenged by an "expert" in the Law (Luke 10:26) who wanted to "test" Jesus. He asked Jesus: *"Teacher," he asked, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?"* (Luke 10:25). Certainly sounds like a simple question. Jesus answered by asking another question- a rabbinical method- "*What is written in the Law?" he replied. "How do you read it?"* (Luke 10:26). The answer was a good one *"He answered, "'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind'; and, 'Love your neighbor as yourself.'"* (Luke 10:27, quoting Deut. 6:5 and Lev. 19:18). Jesus gave an answer that must have at least partially

satisfied the “expert” *“You have answered correctly,” Jesus replied. “Do this and you will live.”* (Luke 10:28).

Here the issue becomes interpretation. As usual, the “devil is in the details” The “expert” wanted to justify himself- and implicitly wanted to limit the definition of neighbor to “somebody like me that I like”, instead of Jesus’ definition “another of God’s children”. It is not easy for us to see everyone as “neighbor”, even though God sees all of us that way. So Jesus answers the question: *“And who is my neighbor?”* (Luke 10:29) with a parable. This parable has been repeated all over the world, and is popularly known as the Parable of the Good Samaritan. I certainly cannot add in any significant way to the scholarship that has been extended towards this amazing story, but will only attempt to add my reflections. The story is very simple, a man passing through a “dangerous” area is attacked, robbed, beaten and left for dead. (Luke 10:30). Then a succession of persons pass him by: 1) a priest, who *“passed by on the other side.”*; 2) a Levite, who also *“passed by on the other side.”*; and finally 3) a Samaritan, who “ when he saw him, he took pity on him.” (Luke 10:31-33). Not only did the Samaritan take “pity on him”, but attended to him, bound his wounds, took him to a nearby inn to recover, and paid for his care (Luke 10:34-35). Each man had the opportunity to help- only one did. The priest and the Levite were likely to be “religious” and familiar with the passages in Deuteronomy and Leviticus that the “expert” quoted. But what mattered was not familiarity with the Law but intimacy with God, and a heart that sees others as brothers and not “inconveniences”!

When asked which one of the three was a “neighbor” m the “expert” correctly said ““The one who had mercy on him.” (Luke 10:37), to which the “expert” is told by Jesus *“Go and do likewise.”*. The central theme her is echoed in Matthew 9:13: *“But go and learn what this means: 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.' For I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners."*

Jesus often visited the home of His supporters and followers, and He was certainly not a stranger to Mary and Martha. Martha was a typical perfectionistic “Type A” person who demanded and expected perfection and was driven to make every detail- cleaning, cooking- “just so” at all times. Her sister Mary was a more relaxed person who valued the conversation over the table more than the degree of polish or perfection of the table and the food on it. When Martha asks Jesus*: “Lord, don’t you care that my sister has left me to do the work by myself? Tell her to help me!”* (Luke 10:40), Jesus wisely replies to her *“Martha, Martha,” the Lord answered, “you are worried and upset about many things, but few things are needed—or indeed only one. Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her.”* (Luke 10:41-42). The “one thing” Mary chose was to focus her attention on the One right in her very presence, and let the “small details” be just that- small details. To grow and mature spiritually, we too must learn to listen to the Master, and pay attention to Him!

Judges 20-21 April 7, 2014 Luke 11:1-28

A terrible thing has happened- and the people of Israel rose up to answer this outrageous behavior of the Benjamites. The Scripture reports: *Then all Israel from*

Dan to Beersheba and from the land of Gilead came together as one and assembled before the LORD in Mizpah. The leaders of all the people of the tribes of Israel took their places in the assembly of God's people, four hundred thousand men armed with swords. (The Benjamites heard that the Israelites had gone up to Mizpah.) Then the Israelites said, "Tell us how this awful thing happened." (Judges 20:1-3). The Levite told them the terrible story of how his concubine had been raped and killed, and how he had cut her body into pieces and sent parts to each of the tribes as a message of this terrible act. And now it was time to tell what the response to this "lewd act" would be: *"Now, all you Israelites, speak up and tell me what you have decided to do." (Judges 20:7) said the Levite. Lots were to be cast to select the fighting men to go up against the Benjamites: "But now this is what we'll do to Gibeah: We'll go up against it in the order decided by casting lots. We'll take ten men out of every hundred from all the tribes of Israel, and a hundred from a thousand, and a thousand from ten thousand, to get provisions for the army. Then, when the army arrives at Gibeah[a] in Benjamin, it can give them what they deserve for this outrageous act done in Israel." So all the Israelites got together and united as one against the city."* (Judges 20:9b-11)
The rest of Israel knew that only a few of the Benjamites were responsible for this act, so they asked that they be turned over for justice to be done*: "turn those wicked men of Gibeah over to us so that we may put them to death and purge the evil from Israel."* (Judges 20:13)

The Benjamites stubbornly refused to turn the men over. Why didn't they? Was it a matter of pride, or a matter of the tribe dealing justice to its own and not letting others administer punishment? We may never know, but the Scripture records: "*But the Benjamites would not listen to their fellow Israelites. From their towns they came together at Gibeah to fight against the Israelites. At once the Benjamites mobilized twenty-six thousand swordsmen from their towns, in addition to seven hundred able young men from those living in Gibeah. Among all these soldiers there were seven hundred select troops who were left-handed, each of whom could sling a stone at a hair and not miss."* (Judges 20:13b-16) The odds were long for the tribe of Benjamin- 26,000 versus: "Israel, apart from Benjamin, mustered four hundred thousand swordsmen, all of them fit for battle." (Judges 20:17) The Israelites inquired of God as to "who is to go first" and Judah was chosen. (Judges 20:18) The battle, however, did not go well for Judah: *"The Benjamites came out of Gibeah and cut down twenty-two thousand Israelites on the battlefield that day. But the Israelites encouraged one another and again took up their positions where they had stationed themselves the first day. 23 The Israelites went up and wept before the Lord until evening, and they inquired of the Lord. They said, "Shall we go up again to fight against the Benjamites, our fellow Israelites?" The Lord answered, "Go up against them." Then the Israelites drew near to Benjamin the second day. This time, when the Benjamites came out from Gibeah to oppose them, they cut down another eighteen thousand Israelites, all of them armed with swords."* (Judges 20:21-25). The casualties were fierce- twenty two thousand on day 1 and another eighteen thousand on day 2. How could this have been God's will? The Israelites wept, fasted, and presented offerings before the Lord at Bethel, where the ark was located at that time, and inquired of the Lord a second time. The answer was very clear: *"Go, for tomorrow I will give them into your hands."* (Judges 20:28b)

The strategy for battle was changed…a group from the army of Judah was to attack, and then fall back as if defeated. The Benjamites would then be lured into an ambush. Then the ambush was triggered: *"Then ten thousand of Israel's able young men made a frontal attack on Gibeah. The fighting was so heavy that the Benjamites did not realize how near disaster was. The Lord defeated Benjamin before Israel, and on that day the Israelites struck down 25,100 Benjamites, all armed with swords. Then the Benjamites saw that they were beaten."* (Judges 20:34-36) And it only got worse for the tribe of Benjamin- the armies of the other tribes attacked the city, sacked it and burned it. The Benjamites knew defeat was certain and when *"the column of smoke began to rise from the city, the Benjamites turned and saw the whole city going up in smoke. Then the Israelites counterattacked, and the Benjamites were terrified, because they realized that disaster had come on them. So they fled before the Israelites in the direction of the wilderness, but they could not escape the battle. And the Israelites who came out of the towns cut them down there. They surrounded the Benjamites, chased them and easily overran them in the vicinity of Gibeah on the east. Eighteen thousand Benjamites fell, all of them valiant fighters. As they turned and fled toward the wilderness to the rock of Rimmon, the Israelites cut down five thousand men along the roads. They kept pressing after the Benjamites as far as Gidom and struck down two thousand more. On that day twenty-five thousand Benjamite swordsmen fell, all of them valiant fighters. But six hundred of them turned and fled into the wilderness to the rock of Rimmon, where they stayed four months.* (Judges 20:40-47). So the Benjamites were almost totally eliminated from Israel, and now the problem of inheritance for the wives and children left behind had to be addressed.

One of the problems with the nearly "missing" tribe is that the other tribes had taken an oath *""Not one of us will give his daughter in marriage to a Benjamite."* (Judges 21:1) Furthermore they had asked: *"Who from all the tribes of Israel has failed to assemble before the LORD?"* For they had taken a solemn oath that anyone who failed to assemble before the LORD at Mizpah was to be put to death. (Judges 21:5b) Furthermore they decided to eliminate "anyone that failed to assemble": *"So the assembly sent twelve thousand fighting men with instructions to go to Jabesh Gilead and put to the sword those living there, including the women and children. "This is what you are to do," they said. "Kill every male and every woman who is not a virgin." They found among the people living in Jabesh Gilead four hundred young women who had never slept with a man, and they took them to the camp at Shiloh in Canaan."* (Judges 20:10b-12) An attempt was made to reunite the few Benjamites that fled and survived with the women that were selected, but there were not "enough for all of them" (Judges 20:14). So then in a bizarre sequence of events, the Benjamites were told *"Go and hide in the vineyards and watch. When the young women of Shiloh come out to join in the dancing, rush from the vineyards and each of you seize one of them to be your wife. Then return to the land of Benjamin. When their fathers or brothers complain to us, we will say to them, 'Do us the favor of helping them, because we did not get wives for them during the war. You will not be guilty of breaking your oath because you did not give your daughters to them.'"* (Judges 21:20b-22). And thus the tribe was repopulated and not lost forever. Judges ends with the same ominous statement that is repeated as a theme throughout the book: *"In those days Israel had no king; everyone did as they saw fit."* (Judges 21:25)

Luke 11:1-28

How should we pray? This is certainly a very honest and important question. The New Testament states that we should "pray without ceasing" (1 Thess. 5:17), but what does this mean in a practical, every day sense? Some of the Catholic orders are devoted to prayer, and some of them call work "prayer with the hands". In Spurgeon's sermon and commentary on this verse, he instructs us: "While your hands are busy with the world, let your hearts still talk with God; not in twenty sentences at a time, for such an interval might be inconsistent with your calling, but in broken sentences and interjections." (http://www.spurgeon.org/sermons/1039.htm). Jesus' disciples wanted to know how to pray, and they asked Him: "Lord, teach us to pray, just as John taught his disciples." (Luke 11:1) Then Jesus gives us this model prayer:

"When you pray, say:
"'Father,
hallowed be your name,
your kingdom come.
3 Give us each day our daily bread.
4 Forgive us our sins,
for we also forgive everyone who sins against us.
And lead us not into temptation.'" (Luke 11:2-4)

Having given them this model, which has been the subject of whole books in commentary and exposition, He further teaches them: *"Suppose you have a friend, and you go to him at midnight and say, 'Friend, lend me three loaves of bread; a friend of mine on a journey has come to me, and I have no food to offer him.' And suppose the one inside answers, 'Don't bother me. The door is already locked, and my children and I are in bed. I can't get up and give you anything.'I tell you, even though he will not get up and give you the bread because of friendship, yet because of your shameless audacity he will surely get up and give you as much as you need. "So I say to you: Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives; the one who seeks finds; and to the one who knocks, the door will be opened. "Which of you fathers, if your son asks for a fish, will give him a snake instead? Or if he asks for an egg, will give him a scorpion? If you then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!"* (Luke 11:5b-13). We are instructed to ask, to seek, to knock! And we are assured that our heavenly Father – who is good beyond compare- will give us "good gifts" that will satisfy our longing. This is God's very nature, and points to the great truth that he created us for fellowship with Him, and to love Him only and always!

Jesus then heals a deaf man of the demon that caused his problem, and he encounters criticism from those less gifted, less God centered and less compassionate than He was. This seemed to be a constant in Jesus' teaching, preaching and healing- there was an almost constant "pushback" from others who out of envy, fear, or simple malice tried to hinder Jesus' good works. This time the

criticism was that Jesus was healing by the power of *"Beelzebul, the prince of demons"* (Luke 11:15) Some even demanded of Jesus a *"sign from heaven"* (Luk1 11:16).

Jesus, who "knew their thoughts" answered them: *"Any kingdom divided against itself will be ruined, and a house divided against itself will fall. If Satan is divided against himself, how can his kingdom stand? I say this because you claim that I drive out demons by Beelzebul. Now if I drive out demons by Beelzebul, by whom do your followers drive them out? So then, they will be your judges. But if I drive out demons by the finger of God, then the kingdom of God has come upon you. "When a strong man, fully armed, guards his own house, his possessions are safe. But when someone stronger attacks and overpowers him, he takes away the armor in which the man trusted and divides up his plunder. "Whoever is not with me is against me, and whoever does not gather with me scatters. "When an impure spirit comes out of a person, it goes through arid places seeking rest and does not find it. Then it says, 'I will return to the house I left.' When it arrives, it finds the house swept clean and put in order. Then it goes and takes seven other spirits more wicked than itself, and they go in and live there. And the final condition of that person is worse than the first."* (Luke 11:17b-26) Jesus challenged the idea of driving out demons by Satan's power by pure logic- what benefit to Satan would that be? Jesus also cautions us that when we are delivered from sin, a demon, or anything that hinders us spiritually, we must build our lives- or rebuild our lives in accordance with God's Word. We must build a solid foundation that will withstand the storms of life, and that will be ready to challenge the tempter. We must remember to "resist the devil, and he will flee from you" (James 4:7)

One hearing Jesus in the crowd said: *"Blessed is the mother who gave you birth and nursed you."* (Luke 11:27b), and Jesus replied: *"Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and obey it."* (Luke 11:28b) Indeed, how "blessed" (happy, full of joy) are we when we take Jesus at His word and live like the children he has called us to be!

Ruth 1-4 April 8, 2014 Luke 11:29-54

The story of Ruth is remarkable in several ways. The "exclusion" of the Moabites from the family of God is suspended, at least long enough to allow Ruth in. She and Boaz were the parents of Obed, the father of Jesse, and the father of David. And

David's line include the Lord Jesus! Earlier we saw Rahab, a prostitute, in Jesus' line also. It's almost as if God was saying- you have your rules, but I reserve the right to make exceptions- especially to teach a lesson. Another remarkable thing about this short book is that it includes a passage often read at weddings – Ruth 1:16b-17 "Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God. Where you die I will die, and there I will be buried. May the Lord deal with me, be it ever so severely, if even death separates you and me." This passage is recited at weddings, but was uttered originally by a daughter in law to her mother in law! A beautiful sentiment nonetheless!

Ruth's story begins as Naomi (Hebrew for "pleasant") and her husband Elimelech left Israel to travel to Moab because of a famine. While in Moab, the two sons Mahlon and Killian married two Moabite girls named Orpah and Ruth. Elimelech dies, and after about ten years in Moab the two sons died as well, leaving the widow Naomi with her two diuaghters-in-law. Naomi urged the girls to stay in Moab and find other husbands, for she was returning to Judah.(Ruth 1:1-6). Naomi's farewell was a tender scene: *"Go back, each of you, to your mother's home. May the Lord show you kindness, as you have shown kindness to your dead husbands and to me. May the Lord grant that each of you will find rest in the home of another husband." Then she kissed them goodbye and they wept aloud and said to her, "We will go back with you to your people."* (Ruth 1:8b-10). Orpah decided to stay in Moab, but Ruth refused and insisted on coming to Judah with Naomi. So the two women return to Judah just about the time for harvest: *So the two women went on until they came to Bethlehem. When they arrived in Bethlehem, the whole town was stirred because of them, and the women exclaimed, "Can this be Naomi?" "Don't call me Naomi," she told them. "Call me Mara because the Almight has made my life very bitter. I went away full, but the LORD has brought me back empty. Why call me Naomi? TheLORD has afflicted me; the Almighty has brought misfortune upon me."* (Ruth 1:19b-21) Naomi syas she should be called Mara (Hebrew for "bitter") since her life, once so full, is now filled with sadness and bitterness.

Naomi had a kinsman of some prominence and wealth (Ruth 2:1). So Naomi, wanting to find a way for the women to support themselves, decided that gleaning the fields would be a way to survive. The practice of gleaning was based on the charitable "leaving of gleanings" in fields as they were harvested- small amounts were left behind for the poor and disadvantaged to collect. Ruth, who was looking for such a field, happened upon a field owned by Naomi's kinsman Boaz: *"Let me go to the fields and pick up the leftover grain behind anyone in whose eyes I find favor." Naomi said to her, "Go ahead, my daughter." ³ So she went out, entered a field and began to glean behind the harvesters. As it turned out, she was working in a field belonging to Boaz, who was from the clan of Elimelek."* (Ruth 2:2b-3) Of course, there are no real "accidents" in cases like these- God had led Ruth to exactly the right place at exactly the right time! The story goes on: "Just then Boaz arrived from Bethlehem and greeted the harvesters, "The Lord be with you!" "The Lord bless you!" they answered. 5 Boaz asked the overseer of his harvesters, "Who does that young woman belong to?" 6 The overseer replied, "She is the Moabite who came back from Moab with Naomi. 7 She said, 'Please let me glean and gather among the sheaves behind the harvesters.' She came into the field and has remained here from morning till now, except for a short rest in the shelter." (Ruth 2:4-6) Boaz speaks to Ruth, and urges her to stay in his field, and had

instructed his men “not to touch her” and offered her water to drink. Ruth is overcome with gratitude, and asks Boaz: “Why have I found such favor in your eyes that you notice me—a foreigner?”(Ruth 2:8-10). Boaz has been told of Ruth’s kindness to Naomi, and he was touched by her willingness to stay with her mother-in-law and care for her. Such kindness was noticed and rewarded. And yet, the greater reward to Ruth still lies ahead in this story.

Boaz continues: *“I’ve been told all about what you have done for your mother-in-law since the death of your husband—how you left your father and mother and your homeland and came to live with a people you did not know before. May the Lord repay you for what you have done. May you be richly rewarded by the Lord, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come to take refuge.” “May I continue to find favor in your eyes, my lord,” she said. “You have put me at ease by speaking kindly to your servant—though I do not have the standing of one of your servants.” At mealtime Boaz said to her, “Come over here. Have some bread and dip it in the wine vinegar.” When she sat down with the harvesters, he offered her some roasted grain. She ate all she wanted and had some left over. As she got up to glean, Boaz gave orders to his men, “Let her gather among the sheaves and don’t reprimand her. Even pull out some stalks for her from the bundles and leave them for her to pick up, and don’t rebuke her.”* (Ruth 2:11b-16). Ruth has been noticed favorable, comforted and rewarded, and has found a place to gather the food she and Naomi need for survival. And, unbeknownst to her at this time, she has also found a redeemer, who will soon become her husband.

Ruth returns to Naomi with an “ephah” of wheat (about 30 pounds), and with the food left from what she had been given. When asked where she had worked at gleaning, Ruth replied:
“The name of the man I worked with today is Boaz” (Ruth 2:19b). Ruth goes on to say: *“He even said to me, ‘Stay with my workers until they finish harvesting all my grain.’” Naomi said to Ruth her daughter-in-law, “It will be good for you, my daughter, to go with the women who work for him, because in someone else’s field you might be harmed.” So Ruth stayed close to the women of Boaz to glean until the barley and wheat harvests were finished. And she lived with her mother-in-law.”* (Ruth 2:21b-23). So Ruth had found a safe place to work and gather wheat, and they had a way to survive at least until the harvest was completed.

The story then takes an interesting turn. Realizing that Ruth may have attracted favor with Boaz, she gives these instructions: “One day Ruth’s mother-in-law Naomi said to her, “My daughter, I must find a home[a] for you, where you will be well provided for. 2 Now Boaz, with whose women you have worked, is a relative of ours. Tonight he will be winnowing barley on the threshing floor. 3 Wash, put on perfume, and get dressed in your best clothes. Then go down to the threshing floor, but don’t let him know you are there until he has finished eating and drinking. 4 When he lies down, note the place where he is lying. Then go and uncover his feet and lie down. He will tell you what to do.” (Ruth 3:1-4). Naomi knew that Boaz had been favorably impressed with Ruth. She may have hoed that he would assert his role as kinsman redeemer and provide Ruth a husband and both of them a home. She was wise enough to know that Boaz had a kind heart, and might well find Ruth attractive as a mate. Naomi’s wisdom was rewarded, as Boaz discovered the young girl lying at his

feet and said: *“Who are you?” he asked. “I am your servant Ruth,” she said. “Spread the corner of your garment over me, since you are a guardian-redeemer of our family.” “The Lord bless you, my daughter,” he replied. “This kindness is greater than that which you showed earlier: You have not run after the younger men, whether rich or poor. And now, my daughter, don’t be afraid. I will do for you all you ask. All the people of my town know that you are a woman of noble character. Although it is true that I am a guardian-redeemer of our family, there is another who is more closely related than I. Stay here for the night, and in the morning if he wants to do his duty as your guardian-redeemer, good; let him redeem you. But if he is not willing, as surely as the Lord lives I will do it. Lie here until morning.”* (Ruth 3:9-13). Boaz was struck with her integrity, kindness and saw her as a woman of character- worthy of being his wife. But first he must become the kinsman redeemer. Boaz showed Ruth another kindness by allowing her to slip away unseen, and provided her with some additional food “six measures of barley”. When Ruth returned to Naomi, she asked: *“How did it go, my daughter?” Then she told her everything Boaz had done for her and added, “He gave me these six measures of barley, saying, ‘Don’t go back to your mother-in-law empty-handed.’” Then Naomi said, “Wait, my daughter, until you find out what happens. For the man will not rest until the matter is settled today.”* (Ruth 3:16b-18).

And the matter was settled rather quickly. Boaz went to the town gate, where he knew the “closer” kinsman redeemer would be found. Boaz offered the “closer” relative an opportunity to be the kinsman redeemer, but wisely pointed out that the cost would be to *“buy the land from Naomi”*, he answered quickly that *“I cannot redeem it because I might endanger my own estate. You redeem it yourself. I cannot do it.”* (Ruth 4:5,6) So Boaz claimed his right as kinsman redeemer this way: *“(Now in earlier times in Israel, for the redemption and transfer of property to become final, one party took off his sandal and gave it to the other. This was the method of legalizing transactions in Israel.) 8 So the guardian-redeemer said to Boaz, “Buy it yourself.” And he removed his sandal. 9 Then Boaz announced to the elders and all the people, “Today you are witnesses that I have bought from Naomi all the property of Elimelek, Kilion and Mahlon. 10 I have also acquired Ruth the Moabite, Mahlon’s widow, as my wife, in order to maintain the name of the dead with his property, so that his name will not disappear from among his family or from his hometown. Today you are witnesses!”* (Ruth 4:7-10) This may seem to us to be a strange way to seal an arrangement, but it was the custom of the day.

Now the time for redemption had come. Boaz literally “bought Ruth back” and redeemed her and her mother in law, and kept the name and line of her dead husband living. And there was more happiness yet. Ruth married Boaz, and the Lord blessed her and she conceived a son- Obed. Naomi was a changed woman- now she had much to rejoice over. She had a grandson, and enjoyed him : *“The women living there said, “Naomi has a son!” And they named him Obed. He was the father of Jesse, the father of David.”* (Ruth 4:17). Out of sadness and darkness God had provided a redeemer…praise His Name!

RUTH AND BOAZ.

Luke 11:29-54

A “sign from heaven”? Even after Jesus had taught, preached, healed, performed miracles, cast out demons, the “crowds” still wanted more- some sort of “proof” that would satisfy them of Jesus’ credentials. By demanding this “sign” they showed their complete lack of understanding not only of the miracles but the One who performed them. These “signs” were not credentials to be casually produced as one might produce an ID or a license- these were evidence of the power, glory, and majesty of God the Father Creator. Jesus showed His frustration with the unbelief of the people: *“This is a wicked generation. It asks for a sign, but none will be given it except the sign of Jonah. For as Jonah was a sign to the Ninevites, so also will the Son of Man be to this generation. The Queen of the South will rise at the judgment with the people of this generation and condemn them, for she came from the ends of the earth to listen to Solomon’s wisdom; and now something greater than Solomon is here. The men of Nineveh will stand up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it, for they repented at the preaching of Jonah; and now something greater than Jonah is here.”* (Luke 11:29b-32). The “sign of Jonah” had yet to occur- Jesus had not yet gone into the earth and then reappeared days later- but the One speaking these words was “greater than Solomon” and “greater than Jonah” and yet they stubbornly and steadfastly refused to have true and life changing faith!

Then Jesus talks and teaches about “light” and the eyes being the “lamp of the body” (Luke 11:33-36). The people could not “see” the truth, their eyes were “unhealthy” and their bodies were “full of darkness”. From birth the Jews believed

and were taught that God is one (Deut. 6:4), and could not (and in the present day cannot) see that Jesus is the promised Messiah.

And now Jesus enumerates the "woes" of the Pharisees. A "Pharisee" had invited Jesus to dinner and had criticized Jesus for not "washing" before the meal. To him, the Pharisee, this was a disrespectful and even "law breaking" omission. Jesus responded to him: *"Now then, you Pharisees clean the outside of the cup and dish, but inside you are full of greed and wickedness. You foolish people! Did not the one who made the outside make the inside also? But now as for what is inside you—be generous to the poor, and everything will be clean for you"* (Luke 11:39b-41). Notice the emphasis is not on ritual but on correct and obedient actions- you can still have a "greedy heart" and wash- but the "cleansing" comes from a heart that is generous! Then Jesus lists the "woes" of the Pharisees. Woe to you: 1) *because you give God a tenth of your mint, rue and all other kinds of garden herbs, but you neglect justice and the love of God. You should have practiced the latter without leaving the former undone.";* 2) *because you love the most important seats in the synagogues and respectful greetings in the marketplaces.;* 3) *because you are like unmarked graves, which people walk over without knowing it."* (Luke 11:42-44) Then one of the "experts in the law" objected to Jesus' teaching by saying: "*Teacher, when you say these things, you insult us also."* Then Jesus begins to list the "woes" of the experts in the law" Woe to them also: 1) *because you load people down with burdens they can hardly carry, and you yourselves will not lift one finger to help them.;* 2) *because you build tombs for the prophets, and it was your ancestors who killed them*., and 3) *because you have taken away the key to knowledge. You yourselves have not entered, and you have hindered those who were entering."* (Luke 11:45-52)

Jesus was an "equal opportunity offender" in that He offended- deliberately- the Pharisees and the "experts in the law". Their errors and sins were almost the same, their hypocrisy and love of self was boundless, and their feeling of superiority and entitlement was hallmark of these "religious people". Their religion had, indeed, become a hindrance to their true faith in the Living God! And they were not too pleased to have this "uneducated teacher and 'rabbi" tell them they were wrong in any way. The opposition was starting, and the feelings ran deep: *"When Jesus went outside, the Pharisees and the teachers of the law began to oppose him fiercely and to besiege him with questions, waiting to catch him in something he might say."* (Luke 11:53-54) They must have hoped He would utter or commit a blasphemy- then they could move against Him.

1 Samuel 1-3 April 9, 2014 Luke 12:1-34

The tone of 1 Samuel is given in the first verse in Chapter 3: *"In those days the word of the Lord was rare; there were not many visions."* (1 Samuel 3:1b). The book of 1 Samuel starts with a description of a righteous man named Elkenah, described as: *"a certain man from Ramathaim, a Zuphite[a] from the hill country of Ephraim, whose name was Elkanah son of Jeroham, the son of Elihu, the son of Tohu, the son of Zuph, an Ephraimite."* (1 Sam. 1:1b). He had two wives- Hannah and Penninah- only Penninah had children (1 Sam. 1:2). Children were viewed then as a sign of favor from God, and Hannah was constantly asking God to help her conceive. Her rival Penninah constantly berated her and made her miserable, and

she cried out to the Lord: *"In her deep anguish Hannah prayed to the Lord, weeping bitterly. 11 And she made a vow, saying, "Lord Almighty, if you will only look on your servant's misery and remember me, and not forget your servant but give her a son, then I will give him to the Lord for all the days of his life, and no razor will ever be used on his head."* (1 Sam. 1:10b-11)

While Hannah was praying to God out of her anguish and pain, the priest Eli saw her- her mouth was moving but no words could be heard. He imagined that she was drunk: "Eli thought she was drunk 14 and said to her, "How long are you going to stay drunk? Put away your wine." (1 Sam. 1:13b-14). She replied to Eli: *"Not so, my lord," Hannah replied, "I am a woman who is deeply troubled. I have not been drinking wine or beer; I was pouring out my soul to the Lord. 16 Do not take your servant for a wicked woman; I have been praying here out of my great anguish and grief."* (1 Sam. 1:15-16) And Eli gave her a kind reply and a blessing: "Eli answered, "Go in peace, and may the God of Israel grant you what you have asked of him."(1 Sam.1:17) After they worshipped and went home, this part of the story has a wonderful ending because God heard and anwered this desperate woman's plea: *"Elkanah made love to his wife Hannah, and the Lord remembered her. So in the course of time Hannah became pregnant and gave birth to a son. She named him Samuel, saying, "Because I asked the Lord for him."* (1 Sam 1:19b-20) Samuel sounds like the Hebrew "heard by God".

Hannah then dedicated this son to the Lord's service as she had promised. "She said to her husband, *"After the boy is weaned, I will take him and present him before the Lord, and he will live there always."* (1 Sam. 1:22b). The boy was to be presented to the priest at the Temple, the place of worship. Hannah did exactly as she had promised God: *"After he was weaned, she took the boy with her, young as he was, along with a three-year-old bull, an ephah of flour and a skin of wine, and brought him to the house of the Lord at Shiloh. When the bull had been sacrificed, they brought the boy to Eli, and she said to him, "Pardon me, my lord. As surely as you live, I am the woman who stood here beside you praying to the Lord. I prayed for this child, and the Lord has granted me what I asked of him. So now I give him to the Lord. For his whole life he will be given over to the Lord." And he worshiped the Lord there."* (1 Sam. 1:24-28). Notice that Samuel, even though he was very young- worshipped God at the Temple!

Hannah, with a heart full of praise and thanksgiving to God, prayed this beautiful prayer:

"Then Hannah prayed and said:

"My heart rejoices in the LORD;
in the LORD my horn is lifted high.
My mouth boasts over my enemies,
for I delight in your deliverance.
"There is no one holy like the LORD;
there is no one besides you;
there is no Rock like our God." (1 Sam 2:1-2)

Hannah and Elkenah then went home, and left the boy at the Temple to spend a lifetime serving God: *Then Elkanah went home to Ramah, but the boy ministered before the LORD under Eli the priest.* (1 Sam. 2:11).

However, all was not well with Eli and his family. His two sons were a disgrace to the priesthood: "Eli's sons were scoundrels; they had no regard for the LORD." (1 Sam. 2:12). They were in the practice of taking whatever they liked from the sacrifices offered at the Temple, with no regard for the Law and the procedures prescribed bu the Law- the ruling principles were greed and entitlement. *"This sin of the young men was very great in the Lord's sight, for they were treating the Lord's offering with contempt."* (1 Sam. 2:17) In stark contrast to the spiritual state of the two sons of Eli, *"Samuel was ministering before the Lord—a boy wearing a linen ephod. Each year his mother made him a little robe and took it to him when she went up with her husband to offer the annual sacrifice. Eli would bless Elkanah and his wife, saying, "May the Lord give you children by this woman to take the place of the one she prayed for and gave to[i] the Lord." Then they would go home. And the Lord was gracious to Hannah; she gave birth to three sons and two daughters. Meanwhile, the boy Samuel grew up in the presence of the Lord."* (1 Sam. 2:18b-21) The two sons continued to ignore their father's warnings: *"Why do you do such things? I hear from all the people about these wicked deeds of yours. No, my sons; the report I hear spreading among the Lord's people is not good. If one person sins against another, God[j] may mediate for the offender; but if anyone sins against the Lord, who will intercede for them?"* (1 Sam 2:23b-25) And the Scripture tells us that it was God's will "to put them to death." (1 Sa. 2:25b). What a contrast between the lifetime devotion and dedication of Samuel, and the two sons Hophni and Phineas who disgraced not only their family but God Himself! The Scripture tells us that *"the boy Samuel continued to grow in stature and in favor with the Lord and with people."* (1 Sam. 2:26). These words parallel the ones used by Luke in his gospel (Luke 2:52) describing the boy Jesus.

A man of God came to Eli and gave him a disturbing prophesy and statement from God: *"Why do you scorn my sacrifice and offering that I prescribed for my dwelling? Why do you honor your sons more than me by fattening yourselves on the choice parts of every offering made by my people Israel?'*(1 Sam. 2:29) God's prophesy was to: *"cut short your strength and the strength of your priestly house, so that no one in it will reach old age.."* (1 Sam. 2:31b), and specifically that: *"…your two sons, Hophni and Phinehas, will be a sign to you—they will both die on the same day."* (1 Sam. 2:34b). God was not to leave the priestly office empty, for God promised to: *"raise up for myself a faithful priest, who will do according to what is in my heart and mind. I will firmly establish his priestly house, and they will minister before my anointed one always."* (1 Sam. 2:35b).

The boy Samuel ministered: "before the Lord under Eli." (1 Sam. 3:1), and God called him by name. Not once, but three times God called His servant Samuel. This is how He calls us- individually and by name- because He knows us, and knows our name! Eli realized that God was calling the boy Samuel, and told him: *"Go and lie down, and if he calls you, say, 'Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.'" So Samuel went and lay down in his place. The Lord came and stood there, calling as at the other times, "Samuel! Samuel!" Then Samuel said, "Speak, for your servant is*

listening." (1 Sam. 3:9b-10). And this is exactly how we must call out to God when He is near- "Speak, for your servant is listening!". And we must truly listen with all our heart and mind to God's Word for us- and then accomplish his call to us with the help of His Holy Spirit". This is how God changes us- and this is how He changes the world- one obedient act at a time. God then spoke to Samuel: *"And the Lord said to Samuel: "See, I am about to do something in Israel that will make the ears of everyone who hears about it tingle. At that time I will carry out against Eli everything I spoke against his family—from beginning to end. For I told him that I would judge his family forever because of the sin he knew about; his sons blasphemed God,[l] and he failed to restrain them. Therefore I swore to the house of Eli, 'The guilt of Eli's house will never be atoned for by sacrifice or offering.'"* (1 Sam. 3:11-14)

Samuel was afraid to tell Eli the vision- after all, Eli had treated him kindly, cared for him and ministered to his needs. But Eli was strong enough and still trusted God enough to tell Samuel: *""Do not hide it from me. May God deal with you, be it ever so severely, if you hide from me anything he told you." So Samuel told him everything, hiding nothing from him. Then Eli said, "He is the Lord; let him do what is good in his eyes."* (1 Sa. 3:17b-18). And the Lord prospered Samuel and began to speak through him to the people: *"The LORD was with Samuel as he grew up, and he let none of Samuel's words fall to the ground. And all Israel from Dan to Beersheba recognized that Samuel was attested as a prophet of the LORD. The LORD continued to appear at Shiloh, and there he revealed himself to Samuel through his word. "* (1 Sam. 3:19-21)

Luke 12:1-34

Just about everywhere- and anytime- Jesus went out in public, a crowd of some size gathered. We almost always picture these scenes with an "inner circle" of disciples closest to Jesus, with the teeming multitudes pressing closer to hear the words of the Master and not miss a single sentence He said. Such a gathering had occurred, and Luke describes this gathering as large: "a crowd of many thousands had gathered, so that they were trampling on one another" (Luke 12:1). Jesus then spoke first "to his disciples" and told them very plainly *"Be on your guard against the yeast of the Pharisees, which is hypocrisy. There is nothing concealed that will not be disclosed, or hidden that will not be made known. What you have said in the dark will be heard in the daylight, and what you have whispered in the ear in the inner rooms will be proclaimed from the roofs."* (Luke 12:1b-3) The word "hypocrisy" comes from a Greek root word "hypokrisis" which can be translated "play-acting" or "acting out". Jesus is telling His disciples that the Pharisees are "acting" like they love God, but are truly not loving God but only themselves, their positions of power and influence, and their own great learning. He also assures that that this "concealment" will not work- that all will be revealed for what it truly is!

Jesus then goes on to tell His followers not to be afraid of those who "kill the body" but only of those who have the "authority to throw you into hell" (Luke 12:4-5). This Scripture, and Matthew 10:28 are very similar to the declarations in Psalm 46, which was the basis of Martin Luther's great hymn, "A Mighty Fortress is Our God" …" The body they may kill: God's truth abideth still, His kingdom is forever."

(http://congsing.org/a_mighty_fortress.html). Those that kill the body cannot extinguish our relationship to God- those who turn us away from God, through temptation or the allure of idolatry and self- worship- these can cause us to lose fellowship with God forever- which is Hell itself!

The Jesus gives a great reassurance- we matter to God! *"Are not five sparrows sold for two pennies? Yet not one of them is forgotten by God. Indeed, the very hairs of your head are all numbered. Don't be afraid; you are worth more than many sparrows."* (Luke 12:6-7). He then taught that we are to acknowledge Him before men: *whoever publicly acknowledges me before others, the Son of Man will also acknowledge before the angels of God. 9 But whoever disowns me before others will be disowned before the angels of God. 10 And everyone who speaks a word against the Son of Man will be forgiven, but anyone who blasphemes against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven.* (Luke 12:8b-10) And what is this "blasphemy against the Holy Spirit- it is simply saying "no" to God until we are always saying no to Him- then He truly can't reach us and claim us! He will not force us to love Him- we must say "yes" to God! The Jesus taught His followers that they did not have to worry "what they would say" when brought before authorities because of Him: *"When you are brought before synagogues, rulers and authorities, do not worry about how you will defend yourselves or what you will say, for the Holy Spirit will teach you at that time what you should say."* (Luke 12:11b-12) This was a new teaching- the Holy Spirit had not yet been given at Pentecost, or generally to all believers at that time.

The Jesus tells to story of the "rich fool". This man was prosperous, and wanted to store his enormous crop so that he could "relax and enjoy it". His error was not in being prosperous, or in wanting to enjoy life- it was in not being "rich toward God" (Luke 12:21). He had done everything "right" except to make God the very center of his life and labors- he was prosperous in the world's eyes but poor in God's- and he did not have the luxury of an infinite amount of time to discover God's truth. God scolds him by saying: *'You fool! This very night your life will be demanded from you. Then who will get what you have prepared for yourself?'* (Luke 12:20b)

Then finally, Jesus tells His followers not to worry about the "small things" which to us seem like "big things" or "essential things". It is natural to trust only ourselves for the provision of life- for a job to earn money so that we can provide the "necessities of life" for ourselves and our families. Jesus points His followers to nature, and tells them: *"Consider how the wild flowers grow. They do not labor or spin. Yet I tell you, not even Solomon in all his splendor was dressed like one of these. If that is how God clothes the grass of the field, which is here today, and tomorrow is thrown into the fire, how much more will he clothe you—you of little faith! And do not set your heart on what you will eat or drink; do not worry about it. For the pagan world runs after all such things, and your Father knows that you need them. But seek his kingdom, and these things will be given to you as well.* (Luke 12:27-31). Jesus is showing them that "seeking God firsy" sets everything else in its proper place- the priority in our lives is loving, worshipping and serving God- He will take care of "the rest" for us!

The Jesus deals with a basic human problem- fear. Fear comes from lack of trust and faith, and can be cast out with "perfect love" (1 John 4:18). Jesus teaches: *"Do*

not be afraid, little flock, for your Father has been pleased to give you the kingdom. Sell your possessions and give to the poor. Provide purses for yourselves that will not wear out, a treasure in heaven that will never fail, where no thief comes near and no moth destroys. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also." (Luke 12:32-34) Truly, our heart is on out treasure- if God is our treasure, then we will have gifts of infinite and lasting worth!

1 Samuel 4-6 April 10, 2014 Luke 12:35-59

The ark of the covenant- the central point of worship- the dwelling place of God in the Temple- was captured by the pagan Philistines! (1 San. 4:11) The strategy of the "elders" was to bring the ark into the field of battle as an inspiration. And for a while at least, the plan seemed effective: *"When the ark of the Lord's covenant came into the camp, all Israel raised such a great shout that the ground shook. Hearing the uproar, the Philistines asked, "What's all this shouting in the Hebrew camp?" When they learned that the ark of the Lord had come into the camp, the Philistines were afraid. "A god has[a] come into the camp," they said. "Oh no! Nothing like this has happened before. We're doomed! Who will deliver us from the hand of these mighty gods? They are the gods who struck the Egyptians with all kinds of plagues in the wilderness. Be strong, Philistines! Be men, or you will be subject to the Hebrews, as they have been to you. Be men, and fight!"* (1 Sam. 4:5-9). But the Philistines fought hard and *"the Israelites were defeated and every man*

fled to his tent. The slaughter was very great; Israel lost thirty thousand foot soldiers. The ark of God was captured, and Eli's two sons, Hophni and Phinehas, died." (1 Sam. 4:10b-11)

Eli was waiting by the road for news from the battle. The Scripture says he "feared for the ark of God" (1 Sam. 4:13). Undoubtedly he also feared for his two sons, as evil as they had become. One never stops being a father to children. The news was horrific- the army of Israel had suffered severe losses, and *"Also your two sons, Hophni and Phinehas, are dead, and the ark of God has been captured."* (1 Sam. 4:17b). At the news, Eli- who was ninety eight- fell backward off his chair, broke his neck and died. God's promise had been fulfilled- all three of them died in the same day. Eli had led Israel for forty years. (1 Sam. 4:18) And the misery in Eli's family was not over yet- his daughter in law died giving birth to a son- Ichabod -which means "no glory", and she said: *"The Glory has departed from Israel, for the ark of God has been captured."* (1 Sam 4:22b).

And now the Philistines had captured the ark, and they quickly took it to one of their cities where an idol of their god "Dagon" was located. The ark seemed to have power of its own, as the Scripture reports: *"After the Philistines had captured the ark of God, they took it from Ebenezer to Ashdod. Then they carried the ark into Dagon's temple and set it beside Dagon. When the people of Ashdod rose early the next day, there was Dagon, fallen on his face on the ground before the ark of the Lord! They took Dagon and put him back in his place. But the following morning when they rose, there was Dagon, fallen on his face on the ground before the ark of the Lord! His head and hands had been broken off and were lying on the threshold; only his body remained. That is why to this day neither the priests of Dagon nor any others who enter Dagon's temple at Ashdod step on the threshold."* (1 Sam. 5:1-5) The "Lord's hand was heavy" on the people of Ashdod, the Philistine city where the ark was now located. The people were infested with tumors, and decided that the ark must be moved away from them: *"The ark of the god of Israel must not stay here with us, because his hand is heavy on us and on Dagon our god." So they called together all the rulers of the Philistines and asked them, "What shall we do with the ark of the god of Israel?" They answered, "Have the ark of the god of Israel moved to Gath." So they moved the ark of the God of Israel. But after they had moved it, the Lord's hand was against that city, throwing it into a great panic. He afflicted the people of the city, both young and old, with an outbreak of tumors. So they sent the ark of God to Ekron."* (1 Sam. 5:7b-10). The ark was a "hot potato" that nobody wanted in their town- The people of Ekron didn't want the ark- they probably had already heard the fate of the cities that the ark was sent to. The people of Ekron were affected as well: *"They have brought the ark of the god of Israel around to us to kill us and our people." So they called together all the rulers of the Philistines and said, "Send the ark of the god of Israel away; let it go back to its own place, or it will kill us and our people." For death had filled the city with panic; God's hand was very heavy on it. Those who did not die were afflicted with tumors, and the outcry of the city went up to heaven."* (1 Sam. 5:10b-12) The plan was then devised to send the ark back to the people of Israel- where it belonged, and where God clearly wanted it to be!

The plan was to send it back- along with a guilt offering, and hope that the God of heaven would have mercy on them: *When the ark of the Lord had been in Philistine territory seven months, 2 the Philistines called for the priests and the diviners and said, "What shall we do with the ark of the Lord? Tell us how we should send it back to its place." They answered, "If you return the ark of the god of Israel, do not send it back to him without a gift; by all means send a guilt offering to him. Then you will be healed, and you will know why his hand has not been lifted from you." The Philistines asked, "What guilt offering should we send to him?" They replied, "Five gold tumors and five gold rats, according to the number of the Philistine rulers, because the same plague has struck both you and your rulers. Make models of the tumors and of the rats that are destroying the country, and give glory to Israel's god. Perhaps he will lift his hand from you and your gods and your land.Why do you harden your hearts as the Egyptians and Pharaoh did? When Israel's god dealt harshly with them, did they not send the Israelites out so they could go on their way?"* (1 Sam. 6:1-6). The Philistines had a plan- to set the ark on a new cart, pulled by "two cows that have calved but never yoked", and send it on its way. If the cows take the cart to Beth Shemesh, the Philistines would conclude that "the LORD has brought this great disaster on us." (1 Sam. 6:9b)- if the cart went another way then the disasters that they experienced would be regarded as "by chance" (1 Sa, 6:10b). Sure enough, the cows pulling the cart cart went to Beth Shemesh, *"they did not turn to the right or to the left. The rulers of the Philistines followed them as far as the border of Beth Shemesh."* (1 Sa. 6:12b). The people of Beth Shemesh saw the ark approaching and rejoiced (1 Sam 6:13). The people: *"chopped up the wood of the cart and sacrificed the cows as a burnt offering to the Lord. The Levites took down the ark of the Lord, together with the chest containing the gold objects, and placed them on the large rock. On that day the people of Beth Shemesh offered burnt offerings and made sacrifices to the Lord. The five rulers of the Philistines saw all this and then returned that same day to Ekron."* (1 Sa. 6:14b-16). The celebration was tempered with sorrow, for: *"God struck down some of the inhabitants of Beth Shemesh, putting seventy[a] of them to death because they looked into the ark of the Lord. The people mourned because of the heavy blow the Lord had dealt them. 20 And the people of Beth Shemesh asked, "Who can stand in the presence of the Lord, this holy God? To whom will the ark go up from here?"* (1 Sam. 6:19b-20) The people "sent messengers" to the people of Kiriath Jearim, and said: *"The Philistines have returned the ark of the Lord. Come down and take it up to your town."* (1 Sam. 6:21).

The issue here seems to be that of "reverence"- reverence for the symbol- and to the Hebews at least- the very presence of God Himself. Some commentators have pointed out that more reverence was paid to the ark by the Philistines in using a new cart and unyoked cows than the Hebrews who received that ark. God certainly was not pleased with His people taking such a long time to recover the ark- was it not precious to them? Would they not be willing to sacrifice to get the ark back to its proper place? (http://biblehub.com/1_samuel/6-7.htm). Again we see God administering the "death penalty" for offenses that we think are not deserving of such harshness, but that seems to be the way that irreverence was dealt with.

The Ark of the Covenant Returning to Israel- The Ultimate Bible Picture Collection

Luke 12:35-59

Watchfulness- not paranoia- not wild "calculations and predictions" of the end time, but watchfulness. Jesus tells us to "watch and pray", for we don't know when He is returning in judgment. (Matthew 21:36; 26:41). Jesus points us to the right heart attitude as we await His promised coming: *"Be dressed ready for service and keep your lamps burning, like servants waiting for their master to return from a wedding banquet, so that when he comes and knocks they can immediately open the door for him. It will be good for those servants whose master finds them watching when he comes. Truly I tell you, he will dress himself to serve, will have them recline at the table and will come and wait on them. It will be good for those servants whose master finds them ready, even if he comes in the middle of the night or toward daybreak."* (Luke 12:35-38) Jesus warns us that we should be "ready", even if it seems to us that a very long time has passed since His promise to return was given: *"But suppose the servant says to himself, 'My master is taking a long time in coming,' and he then begins to beat the other servants, both men and women, and to eat and drink and get drunk. The master of that servant will come on a day when he does not expect him and at an hour he is not aware of. He will cut him to pieces and assign him a place with the unbelievers."* (Luke 12:45b-46) Certainly none of us wants to be classified as an unbeliever- so we must never act like an unbeliever in our attitudes or actions.

Then Jesus gives us a principle that provides insight into the workings of the heavenly Mind: *"From everyone who has been given much, much will be demanded;*

and from the one who has been entrusted with much, much more will be asked." (Luke 12:48b) One might argue that it would be better not to be given "much", but who would want to deny themselves the incredible blessings of the Lord? Better to be blessed and accountable than not!

Those who see Jesus as "gentle Jesus, meek and mild" would do well to hear what He is saying in the next part of Luke's gospel. He always creates a response, and in some cases the response is one that causes division and discord. Jesus' claims on us are radical- He wants and demands our ultimate loyalty, above all else. In some cases that means that loyalty to family, country or "tribe" must be relegated to a second position. This is the reason that governments that demand absolute loyalty to the "state" often persecute Christians- they simply cannot tolerate differing loyalties! See the excellent discussion of this at (http://www.thirdway.com/peace/?Page=1831%7Cls+Jesus+Lord%3F).

Lastly Jesus challenges the powers of observation and reasoning of so many of us. We see*: "a cloud rising in the west, immediately you say, 'It's going to rain,' and it does. And when the south wind blows, you say, 'It's going to be hot,' and it is. Hypocrites! You know how to interpret the appearance of the earth and the sky. How is it that you don't know how to interpret this present time?"* (Luke 12:54b-56) And yet it is very difficult to interpret the "present time" even some 2000 years later. Everything is in place that is required for the Second Coming- Israel is a nation again, there are "wars and rumors of war". There are even several excellent candidates for the "antichrist". Some would argue that there are serious movements made toward a true world government. And Jesus tells us that we must: *"... judge for yourselves what is right?*" (Luke 12:57).

1 Samuel 7-9 April 11, 2014 Luke 13:1-21

So the ark finally found a resting place- and the right persons to care for it and conduct worship with the ark as its center: *"So the men of Kiriath Jearim came and took up the ark of the LORD. They brought it to Abinadab's house on the hill and consecrated Eleazar his son to guard the ark of the LORD. The ark remained at Kiriath Jearim a long time—twenty years in all."* (1 Sam. 7:1-2). More important than the physical and geographic location of the ark was the place of God in the hearts of His people. Under Samuel's leadership, they turned to the Lord and away from the pagan gods and practices that had snared them before. Scripture tells us: "Samuel said to all the Israelites, "*If you are returning to the Lord with all your hearts, then rid yourselves of the foreign gods and the Ashtoreths and commit yourselves to the Lord and serve him only, and he will deliver you out of the hand of the Philistines." So the Israelites put away their Baals and Ashtoreths, and served the Lord only."* (1 Sam. 7:3-4)

So Samuel assembled the people at Mizpah, in order to sacrifice to God and show their devotion and rededication to Him. Samuel told the people: *"Assemble all Israel at Mizpah, and I will intercede with the Lord for you." When they had assembled at Mizpah, they drew water and poured it out before the Lord. On that day they fasted and there they confessed, "We have sinned against the Lord." Now Samuel was serving as leader[a] of Israel at Mizpah."* (1 Sa. 7:5b-6) The Philistines heard about this gathering, and saw an opportunity to attack God's people. This time, however,

the power and might of the Lord were with His people, and He repelled and defeated the Philistines: *When the Philistines heard that Israel had assembled at Mizpah, the rulers of the Philistines came up to attack them. When the Israelites heard of it, they were afraidbecause of the Philistines. They said to Samuel, "Do not stop crying out to the LORD our God for us, that he may rescue us from the hand of the Philistines." Then Samuel took a suckling lamb and sacrificed it as a whole burnt offering to the LORD. He cried out to theLORD on Israel's behalf, and the LORD answered him. While Samuel was sacrificing the burnt offering, the Philistines drew near to engage Israel in battle. But that day the LORD thundered with loud thunder against the Philistines and threw them into such a panic that they were routed before the Israelites. The men of Israel rushed out of Mizpah and pursued the Philistines, slaughtering them along the way to a point below Beth Kar. Then Samuel took a stone and set it up between Mizpah and Shen. He named it Ebenezer, saying, "Thus far the LORD has helped us."* (1 Sam. 7:7-12) Ebenezer in Hebrew means "stone of help".

At last there was an honest, righteous and godly man to judge and rule over Israel. The people prospered under Samuel's leadership for many years. The Scripture records this summary: *"Samuel continued as Israel's leader all the days of his life. From year to year he went on a circuit from Bethel to Gilgal to Mizpah, judging Israel in all those places. But he always went back to Ramah, where his home was, and there he also held court for Israel. And he built an altar there to the Lord."* (1 Sam. 7:15b-17) Unfortunately, when Samule grew "old" and appointed his sons Joel and Abijah to replace him, they were not the same caliber and character as their father: *"When Samuel grew old, he appointed his sons as Israel's leaders. The name of his firstborn was Joel and the name of his second was Abijah, and they served at Beersheba. But his sons did not follow his ways. They turned aside after dishonest gain and accepted bribes and perverted justice."* (1 Sam. 8:1-3). So the people approached Samuel, demanding that he: *"appoint a king to lead us, such as all the other nations have."* (1 Sam. 8:5b). God's perfect plan was always that He would be King of Israel, but God realized that the people desired to be "like other nations", and accepted a Plan "B". God seems to always be making "good out of our bad deals" (Romans 8:28). He told Samuel: *"Listen to all that the people are saying to you; it is not you they have rejected, but they have rejected me as their king. As they have done from the day I brought them up out of Egypt until this day, forsaking me and serving other gods, so they are doing to you. Now listen to them; but warn them solemnly and let them know what the king who will reign over them will claim as his rights."* (1 Sam. 8:7b-9). God knew there would be a cost to the people to have a king. His warnings were very clear: *"This is what the king who will reign over you will claim as his rights: He will take your sons and make them serve with his chariots and horses, and they will run in front of his chariots. Some he will assign to be commanders of thousands and commanders of fifties, and others to plow his ground and reap his harvest, and still others to make weapons of war and equipment for his chariots. He will take your daughters to be perfumers and cooks and bakers. He will take the best of your fields and vineyards and olive groves and give them to his attendants. He will take a tenth of your grain and of your vintage and give it to his officials and attendants. Your male and female servants and the best of your cattle[e] and donkeys he will take for his own use. He will take a tenth of your flocks, and you yourselves will become his slaves. When that day comes, you will cry out for relief from the king you have chosen, but the Lord will not*

answer you in that day." (1 Sam. 8:11b-18). But like spoiled children, the people insisted on their way- they must have a king! So the second best plan was put into action, despite the warnings given: *"When Samuel heard all that the people said, he repeated it before the Lord. 22 The Lord answered, "Listen to them and give them a king."* (1 Sam. 8:21-22)

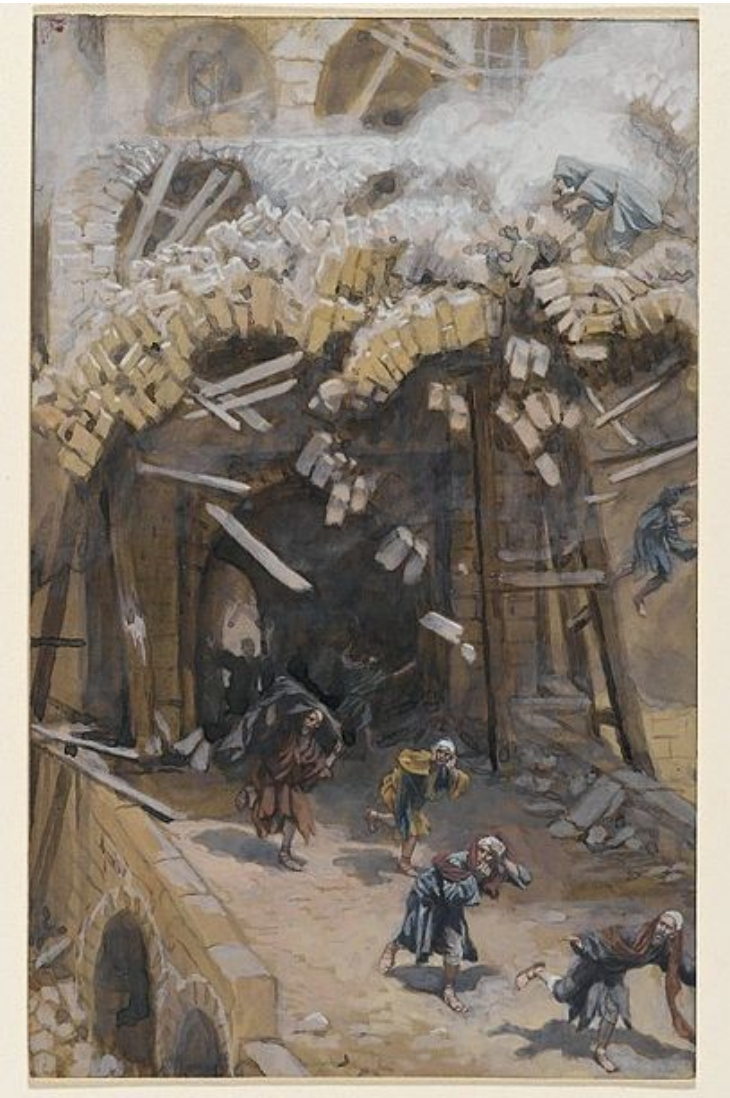
Amazingly, God chose a Benjamite (remember them from Judges 20?) to rule over the people. Saul, son of Kish, was chosen- a handsome and tall man: "*Kish had a son named Saul, as handsome a young man as could be found anywhere in Israel, and he was a head taller than anyone else."* (1 Sam 9:2) Samuel was given specific and clear directions as to how to find God's anointed "Now the day before Saul came, the Lord had revealed this to Samuel: 16 *"About this time tomorrow I will send you a man from the land of Benjamin. Anoint him ruler over my people Israel; he will deliver them from the hand of the Philistines. I have looked on my people, for their cry has reached me."* (1 Sam. 9:15b-16) One of Saul's first tasks was to free the people from the rule and influence of the Philistines.

Saul was reluctant to accept the role of King of Israel, and offered his excuses to Samuel (sounds a little like Moses contending with God!): "But am I not a Benjamite, from the smallest tribe of Israel, and is not my clan the least of all the clans of the tribe of Benjamin? Why do you say such a thing to me?" (1 Sam. 9:21b). God, however, was to have His way- and Samuel was to be obedient and anoint this young man as Israel's first king. Samule had for Saul a "message from God*": "After they came down from the high place to the town, Samuel talked with Saul on the roof of his house. They rose about daybreak, and Samuel called to Saul on the roof, "Get ready, and I will send you on your way." When Saul got ready, he and Samuel went outside together. As they were going down to the edge of the town, Samuel said to Saul, "Tell the servant to go on ahead of us"—and the servant did so—"but you stay here for a while, so that I may give you a message from God."* (1 Sam. 9:25b-27). We will see the anointing and Sauls change of heart about being God's man in Chapter 10 of first Samuel.

Luke 13:1-21

A very puzzling reference is given in Luke 13:1. One of the commentaries lists these explanatory remarks (http://biblehub.com/commentaries/luke/13-1.htm) "Galileans - People who lived in Galilee. See the notes at Matthew 2:22. They were not under the jurisdiction of Pilate, but of Herod. The Galileans, in the time of Christ, were very wicked. Whose blood Pilate had mingled ... - That is, while they were sacrificing at Jerusalem, Pilate came suddenly upon them and killed them, and "their" blood was mingled with the blood of the animals that they were slaying for sacrifice. It does not mean that Pilate "offered" their blood in sacrifice, but only that as they were sacrificing he killed them. The fact is not mentioned by Josephus, and nothing more is known of it than what is here recorded. We learn, however, from Josephus that the Galileans were very wicked, and that they were much disposed to broils and seditions." The Scripture simply refers to this incident in this way: *"Now there were some present at that time who told Jesus about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mixed with their sacrifices. Jesus answered, "Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans because they*

suffered this way? I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish." (Luke 13:1-3) A similar event is also referred to next: *"those eighteen who died when the tower in Siloam fell on them—do you think they were more guilty than all the others living in Jerusalem? I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish."* (Luke 13:4b-5) The BibleHub commentary says this: "The Lord used these occasions, we see, for something more than the great national lesson. Men are too ready, now as then, to give way to the unloving error of looking at individual misfortune as the consequence of individual crime. Such human uncharitable judgments the Lord bitterly condemns."(http://biblehub.com/luke/13-4.htm)



The Tower of Siloam (Le tour de Siloë) - James Tissot

Jesus' emphasis is that we should repent and not perish- life is short, uncertain and full of unpredictable events that can totally change us or even claim our lives. We should always be ready! Our lives should also bear fruit- the measure of our love and devotion to God can be seen in the fruit- the good fruit- that we bear. God will not tolerate "no fruit" or "bad fruit" for very long- he either changes our hearts or takes us home! Jesus taught this parable about bearing fruit: Then he told this

parable: *“A man had a fig tree growing in his vineyard, and he went to look for fruit on it but did not find any. So he said to the man who took care of the vineyard, ‘For three years now I’ve been coming to look for fruit on this fig tree and haven’t found any. Cut it down! Why should it use up the soil?’ “‘Sir,’ the man replied, ‘leave it alone for one more year, and I’ll dig around it and fertilize it. If it bears fruit next year, fine! If not, then cut it down.’”*(Luke 13:6b-9). Certainly God is patient, and I rejoice at that! But we shouldn’t presume on God’s patience and delay our joyful and obedient service until we “feel like it” or are “motivated” by God. Sometimes we need to do the obedient act first, and the “feelings” and motivation will follow as He changes our hearts.

And on another occasion, Jesus heals on the Sabbath. There were, in fact, seven miracles of healing performed on the Sabbath (http://www.icogsfg.org/sab-7mir.html). Why would Jesus continue this practice, when there were six other days available to Him? Was it to demonstrate that He was Lord of the Sabbath? Was it to illustrate to the hostile “Pharisees and teachers of the law” that he was not bound by their traditions, and that love and compassion were more important that “rules”? Was God using these occasions to further solidify the opposition to Jesus, so that His death at the hands of His enemies was inevitable? We may never know exactly. It may be all these reasons, plus some that only God Himself knows! Whatever the reason, Jesus healed the woman: *“who had been crippled by a spirit for eighteen years. She was bent over and could not straighten up at all. When Jesus saw her, he called her forward and said to her, “Woman, you are set free from your infirmity.” Then he put his hands on her, and immediately she straightened up and praised God.”* (Luke 13:11b-13) Predictably, because Jesus had so openly done “work” on the Sabbath, the Pharisees were: *“Indignant because Jesus had healed on the Sabbath, the synagogue leader said to the people, “There are six days for work. So come and be healed on those days, not on the Sabbath.”* (Luke 13:14) To the, the “rules” were the important thing- to Jesus, healing and compassion were. And once again, Jesus humiliated the “experts” and pleased the people: The Lord answered him, *“You hypocrites! Doesn’t each of you on the Sabbath untie your ox or donkey from the stall and lead it out to give it water? Then should not this woman, a daughter of Abraham, whom Satan has kept bound for eighteen long years, be set free on the Sabbath day from what bound her?” When he said this, all his opponents were humiliated, but the people were delighted with all the wonderful things he was doing.”* (Luke 13:15-17)

Jesus then tells the Parable of the Mustard Seed. To this day (as I have mentioned before) I have wonderful and fond memories of my Mother wearing a glass spherical necklace with a tiny mustard seed in it.

Jesus asked: *"What is the kingdom of God like? What shall I compare it to? It is like a mustard seed, which a man took and planted in his garden. It grew and became a tree, and the birds perched in its branches."* He also said the Kingdom of God was like "yeast"- that leavens the entire batch of bread. (Luke 13:18-21)

1 Samuel 10-12 April 12, 2014 Luke 13:22-35

Saul is anointed! The people have their king! The Scripture records this important and ground breaking event as follows: *"Samuel took a flask of olive oil and poured it on Saul's head and kissed him, saying, "Has not the Lord anointed you ruler over his inheritance?"* (1 Sam. 10:1b). Samuel instructed Saul to go to Zelah, to Rachel's tomb- where he would find the donkeys he was so worried about- and from there proceed to the "great tree of Tabor" and finally to Gibeah, where he was to find a "procession of prophets". As if to confirm the power and hand of God upon him, Saul was to be given the Spirit of God and prophesy along with the prophets. Saul was then to be: *"changed into a different person. 7 Once these signs are fulfilled, do whatever your hand finds to do, for God is with you."* (1 Sam. 10:6b-7). God truly was with Saul, and he was truly a man with a "changed heart" (1 Sam. 10:9). Saul was somewhat reluctant to claim his kingship – when asked by his uncle, he did not mention Samuels' anointing or his filling with the Spirit. Samuel then assembled the tribes of Israel at Mizpah and said: *"This is what the Lord, the God of Israel, says: 'I brought Israel up out of Egypt, and I delivered you from the power of Egypt and all the kingdoms that oppressed you.' But you have now rejected your God, who saves you out of all your disasters and calamities. And you have said, 'No, appoint a king over us.' So now present yourselves before the Lord by your tribes and clans."* (1 Sam. 10:18b-19)

The ruler of Israel was presumable chosen by lot. Since God had already directed Samuel to anoint Saul, the outcome was assured. The clan of Benjamin was chosen, then the clan of Matri, and finally the family of Kish- and Saul was choses- but "could not be found" (1 Sam. 10:20-22). The people wondered where Saul was-

he had hidden himself “among the supplies” (1 Sam. 10:22b). We might wonder why Saul was so “shy” about accepting this great honor. Was the responsibility of leading Israel beginning to appear to be an overwhelming burden? Was Saul by nature a retiring and quiet person? But the people, so eager for a king, found him and marveled at God’s choice: “Do you see the man the Lord has chosen? There is no one like him among all the people.” (1 Sam. 10:24) Samuel said to the gathered tribes of Israel. And the people shouted “Long live the king” (1 Sam 10:24b). Samuel then *“explained the rights and duties of kingship. He wrote them down on a scroll and deposited it before the Lord. Then Samuel dismissed the people to go to their own homes.”* (1 Sam. 10:25) Saul was not without detractors- despite the fact that Saul was: “accompanied by valiant men whose hearts God had touched.” (1 Sam. 10:26b), there were some “scoundrels” who doubted- they said “How can this man save us?” (1 Sam. 10:27)- but Saul “kept silent”.

Saul’s leadership is tested quickly. *“Nahash the Ammonite went up and besieged Jabesh Gilead.”* (1 Sa. 11:1) The men of Gilead tried to negotiate peace with the Ammonites, but the penalty was harsh- the Ammonites required the right eyes of all the men of Gilead. This presumably was to limit their ability to function as soldiers- since the right eye was used to aim a bow or spear and severely limits depth perception- needed in hand-to-hand conflict (https://sermons.logos.com/submissions/10576-1-Samuel-11-1-15-Saul-Has-Victory-at-Jabesh-Gilead#content=/submissions/10576) The leaders of Gibeah responded: *“Give us seven days so we can send messengers throughout Israel; if no one comes to rescue us, we will surrender to you.”* (1 Sam. 11:3b). The city hoped, of course, that a rescuer could be found. When word of the siege reached Saul, he was plowing in the field: *“Just then Saul was returning from the fields, behind his oxen, and he asked, “What is wrong with everyone? Why are they weeping?” Then they repeated to him what the men of Jabesh had said. “* (1 Sam. 11:5b) Saul then received the Spirit of God and acted decisively and effectively: *“When Saul heard their words, the Spirit of God came powerfully upon him, and he burned with anger. He took a pair of oxen, cut them into pieces, and sent the pieces by messengers throughout Israel, proclaiming, “This is what will be done to the oxen of anyone who does not follow Saul and Samuel.” Then the terror of the Lord fell on the people, and they came out together as one. When Saul mustered them at Bezek, the men of Israel numbered three hundred thousand and those of Judah thirty thousand.* (1 Sam. 11:6b-8). So instead of cowering in fear, the people of Israel- with God’s leadership and motivation- rose up as a mighty force to rescue their brothers and sisters in Gilead. The slaughter and destruction of the Ammonites was horrific: “during the last watch of the night they broke into the camp of the Ammonites and slaughtered them until the heat of the day. Those who survived were scattered, so that no two of them were left together.” (1 Sam 11:11b) So Saul’s mustered army- divided into three divisions, complexly defeated the Ammonites and established Saul as leader of Israel.

The people then asked that the “dissenters” to Saul’s kingship be identified and put to death: “*The people then said to Samuel, “Who was it that asked, ‘Shall Saul reign over us?’ Turn these men over to us so that we may put them to death.” But Saul said, “No one will be put to death today, for this day the Lord has rescued Israel.”* (1 Sam. 11:12-13) It is important to note two things- 1) Saul gives God all the credit for rescuing Israel; 2) Saul is not interested in vengeance and retribution, but in uniting

the people. His wisdom was rewarded*: "Then Samuel said to the people, "Come, let us go to Gilgal and there renew the kingship." So all the people went to Gilgal and made Saul king in the presence of the Lord. There they sacrificed fellowship offerings before the Lord, and Saul and all the Israelites held a great celebration."* (1 Sam. 11:14-15) So instead of retribution- celebration; and instead of division- unity! This is the way God wished for His people to act!

Samuel then gives his "farewell speech" to the people of Israel. Samuel said to all Israel, *"I have listened to everything you said to me and have set a king over you. Now you have a king as your leader. As for me, I am old and gray, and my sons are here with you. I have been your leader from my youth until this day. Here I stand. Testify against me in the presence of the Lord and his anointed. Whose ox have I taken? Whose donkey have I taken? Whom have I cheated? Whom have I oppressed? From whose hand have I accepted a bribe to make me shut my eyes? If I have done any of these things, I will make it right." "You have not cheated or oppressed us," they replied. "You have not taken anything from anyone's hand." Samuel said to them, "The Lord is witness against you, and also his anointed is witness this day, that you have not found anything in my hand."* (1 Sam 12:1-5).

Samuel then makes it clear that God's "best and first" plan was to serve as King of Israel- when the people clamored for a king- Samuel relented and anointed a king- but with reluctance since this was not "God's best" plan! Samuel then explain to the people that appointing a king over Israel- other than God- is regarded as a sin: *"Now then, stand still and see this great thing the Lord is about to do before your eyes! 17 Is it not wheat harvest now? I will call on the Lord to send thunder and rain. And you will realize what an evil thing you did in the eyes of the Lord when you asked for a king." 18 Then Samuel called on the Lord, and that same day the Lord sent thunder and rain. So all the people stood in awe of the Lord and of Samuel. 19 The people all said to Samuel, "Pray to the Lord your God for your servants so that we will not die, for we have added to all our other sins the evil of asking for a king." "He is witness," they said."* (1 Sa. 12:16-19) All, however, was not lost. God could forgive them if they were totally committed to Him and to obedience of His law and commands. Samuel explains: *The people all said to Samuel, "Pray to the Lord your God for your servants so that we will not die, for we have added to all our other sins the evil of asking for a king." "Do not be afraid," Samuel replied. "You have done all this evil; yet do not turn away from the Lord, but serve the Lord with all your heart. Do not turn away after useless idols. They can do you no good, nor can they rescue you, because they are useless. For the sake of his great name the Lord will not reject his people, because the Lord was pleased to make you his own. As for me, far be it from me that I should sin against the Lord by failing to pray for you. And I will teach you the way that is good and right. But be sure to fear the Lord and serve him faithfully with all your heart; consider what great things he has done for you. Yet if you persist in doing evil, both you and your king will perish."* (1 Sam. 12:20-25).

Samuel Annoints Saul Schnorr von Carolsfeld woodcuts oodcuts © WELS

Luke 13:22-35

How many will be saved? How do we assure ourselves that we are on the "right path"? Jesus explains the difficulty of being a true follower of His*: "Make every effort to enter through the narrow door, because many, I tell you, will try to enter and will not be able to. Once the owner of the house gets up and closes the door, you will stand outside knocking and pleading, 'Sir, open the door for us.' "But he will answer, 'I don't know you or where you come from.' "Then you will say, 'We ate and drank with you, and you taught in our streets.' "But he will reply, 'I don't know you or where you come from. Away from me, all you evildoers!'* (Luke 13:24-27) Just as Jesus will tell some at the Last Judgment (Matt. 25:31-46). Many who sincerely "believe" that they are loving and serving Him are not, and they will be astonished and distressed as they stand before the One who sees their heart: *"They also will answer, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or needing clothes or sick or in prison, and did not help you?' "He will reply, 'Truly I tell you, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me.' "Then they will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life."* (Matt. 25:44-46) Jesus has come- to make the last the first, and the first the last- He has revolutionized the world: "*People will come from east and west and north and south, and will take their places at the feast in the kingdom of God. Indeed there are those who are last who will be first, and first who will be last."* (Luke 13:29-30).

Jesus then sets His course for Jerusalem. He knew what awaited Him- and yet he continued on the path of following His Father's will for Him. He also wept for Jerusalem- the sorrow only a "prophet" could feel for those prophets who had gone before, only to be killed by a people that did not truly want a Word from God! Jesus

said: *"Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you were not willing. Look, your house is left to you desolate. I tell you, you will not see me again until you say, 'Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.'"* (Luke 13:34-35).

1 Samuel 13-14 April 13, 2014 Luke 14:1-24

Ammonites?....Yes! Philistines?....No! God had given His people a great victory over the Ammonites, but the Philistines remained as the constant and present enemies of the people of God. Saul reigned in Israel for forty two years*: "Saul was thirty years old when he became king, and he reigned over Israel forty- two years."* (1 Sam. 13:1). During this time Saul fell out of favor with God. The precipitating incident in Saul's decline, and God selecting another, was Saul's refusal to "wait" and taking the office of priest in his own hands. The Scripture records this incident this way: *"Saul remained at Gilgal, and all the troops with him were quaking with fear. He waited seven days, the time set by Samuel; but Samuel did not come to Gilgal, and Saul's men began to scatter. So he said, "Bring me the burnt offering and the fellowship offerings." And Saul offered up the burnt offering. Just as he finished making the offering, Samuel arrived, and Saul went out to greet him. "What have you done?" asked Samuel.*
Saul replied, "When I saw that the men were scattering, and that you did not come at the set time, and that the Philistines were assembling at Mikmash, I thought, 'Now the Philistines will come down against me at Gilgal, and I have not sought the Lord's favor.' So I felt compelled to offer the burnt offering." "You have done a foolish thing," Samuel said. "You have not kept the command the Lord your God gave you; if you had, he would have established your kingdom over Israel for all time. But now your kingdom will not endure; the Lord has sought out a man after his own heart and appointed him ruler of his people, because you have not kept the Lord's command." (1 Sam. 13:7b-14) Saul had disobeyed a fundamental rule- a king could not serve as priest- only in Jesus do we see the unity of prophet, priest and king- no one else has the authority to perform all these functions. (http://carm.org/prophet-priest-king). Saul was left with about 600 men, and they camped together at Mikmash (1 Sam. 13:16). The Philistines had prevented the people of Israel to have blacksmiths, so that they could not create weapons. The result was that: *"on the day of the battle not a soldier with Saul and Jonathan had a sword or spear in his hand; only Saul and his son Jonathan had them."* (1 Sam 13:22b). Jonathan, Saul's son, and his armor bearer decided to conduct a reconnaissance mission to see what forces the Philistines had gathered for battle (1 Sam. 14:1). Jonathan was brave- he decided that with the Lord's help, they could defeat this vast number of enemies- even though the army of Israel was without "real weapons": *"Jonathan said to his young armor-bearer, "Come, let's go over to the outpost of those uncircumcised men. Perhaps the Lord will act in our behalf. Nothing can hinder the Lord from saving, whether by many or by few." 7 "Do all that you have in mind," his armor-bearer said. "Go ahead; I am with you heart and soul." 8 Jonathan said, "Come on, then; we will cross over toward them and let them see us. 9 If they say to us, 'Wait there until we come to you,' we will stay where we are and not go up to them. 10 But if they say, 'Come up to us,' we will climb up, because that will be our sign that the Lord has given them into our hands."*
Jonathan's principle was sound- nothing could hinder God from saving- by "many of

by “few”. God had already demonstrated with Gideon that a superior army could be defeated with just a few men- because the “battle is the Lord’s” (2 Chron. 20:15; 1 Sam. 17:47).

When Jonathan heard the Philistine soldier say: *“Come up to us and we’ll teach you a lesson.”* (1 Sam. 14:12b) he knew that God had given the Philistines into the hands of Israel. He confidently told his armor bearer: *“Climb up after me; the LORD has given them into the hand of Israel.”* Then the killing began as Jonathan and the armor bearer began to fight “the Lord’s battle”: *“Jonathan climbed up, using his hands and feet, with his armor-bearer right behind him. The Philistines fell before Jonathan, and his armor-bearer followed and killed behind him. 14 In that first attack Jonathan and his armor-bearer killed some twenty men in an area of about half an acre.”* (1 Sam 14:13-14).

Luke 14:1-24

Jesus went to the house of a Pharisee, and while there He was being “carefully watched” (Luke 14:1). We should not be surprised at this- there was at best an uneasy peace between the Pharisees and Jesus- some were curious about Him, some even considered His teachings to be truth, but most were wary of Him. As had happened on other occasions, Jesus had the opportunity to heal on the Sabbath, and He confronted the Pharisee with some logic and obvious truth: *“There in front of him was a man suffering from abnormal swelling of his body. Jesus asked the Pharisees and experts in the law, “Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath or not?” But they remained silent. So taking hold of the man, he healed him and sent him on his way.*
Then he asked them, “If one of you has a child or an ox that falls into a well on the Sabbath day, will you not immediately pull it out?” And they had nothing to say.” (Luke 14:2-6) Once again, the true message was “mercy not sacrifice”, and the Sabbath was a gift and not a day with illogical and burdensome regulations.

Jesus then commented on our “natural” tendency” to seek a pace of honor. He taught them that when they were guests they should seat themselves in the “lowest place”- and show humility and deference- and then: *“when your host comes, he will say to you, ‘Friend, move up to a better place.’ Then you will be honored in the presence of all the other guests. For all those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.”* (Luke 14:10b-11) Jesus’ clear teaching is that the last shall be first in the Kingdom. We have no doubt heard this teaching frequently throughout our lives, but how many of us have actually practiced it? Jesus then taught that when we hold a celebration we should invite *“the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed. Although they cannot repay you, you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous.”* (Luke 14:13b-14) Those who we “naturally” prefer might repay us, and the depth of our kindness might be lost. However, when we help “the least of these” we are truly helping Him- and He will reward us for our true generosity and kindness!

What if we started a war and “nobody came”? What if we planned a lavish banquet, and none of the invited guests bothered to show up at the appointed time? Jesus uses this parable to illustrate how God calls us to His table. His very people were

"invited", and refused (and still refuse) to come and dine with Him. So Jesus said: *"Then the master told his servant, 'Go out to the roads and country lanes and compel them to come in, so that my house will be full. I tell you, not one of those who were invited will get a taste of my banquet.'"* (Luke 14:23-24). And what were their excuses for not coming? *"The first said, 'I have just bought a field, and I must go and see it. Please excuse me.' "Another said, 'I have just bought five yoke of oxen, and I'm on my way to try them out. Please excuse me.' "Still another said, 'I just got married, so I can't come.'* (Luke 14:18b-20). We have seen this before (Luke 9:57-62) when Jesus asked those who would follow Him to "count the cost", and one by one they refused to "follow Him". When we finally get our own priorities straight we can then see both the great cost and the immeasurable reward of discipleship. Will we truly "follow Him"?

1 Samuel 15-16 April 14, 2014 Luke 14:25-35

Now it was time for God to punish the Amalekites for their shameful treatment of God's people as they left Egypt. God would use the armies of His people to accomplish this: *"Samuel said to Saul, "I am the one the Lord sent to anoint you king over his people Israel; so listen now to the message from the Lord. This is what the Lord Almighty says: 'I will punish the Amalekites for what they did to Israel when they waylaid them as they came up from Egypt. Now go, attack the Amalekites and totally destroy all that belongs to them. Do not spare them; put to death men and women, children and infants, cattle and sheep, camels and donkeys.'"* (1 Sam. 15:1-3) One again, God was very clear- everything was to be destroyed. However, after the Amalekites were defeated, the men kept some livestock- the very best- with the excuse that these would be offered to God in sacrifice. Surely God didn't really mean everything! But God did- and regarded this partial obedience as disobedience. The Scripture records what Saul actually did- *"He took Agag king of the Amalekites alive, and all his people he totally destroyed with the sword. But Saul and the army spared Agag and the best of the sheep and cattle, the fat calves and lambs—everything that was good. These they were unwilling to destroy completely, but everything that was despised and weak they totally destroyed."* (1 Sa, 15:8b-9) Surely that was "close enough" for God. But it was not, and God spoke through Samuel, voicing His displeasure: *"Then the word of the Lord came to Samuel: "I regret that I have made Saul king, because he has turned away from me and has not carried out my instructions." Samuel was angry, and he cried out to the Lord all that night."* (1 Sam. 15:10b-11) Saul greeted Samuel, confident that he had followed God's instructions: *"When Samuel reached him, Saul said, "The Lord bless you! I have carried out the Lord's instructions."* (1 Sam. 15:13). After asking Saul the obvious question- "what is that noise I hear?" (verse 14), then he asks Saul this very pointed question: *"Why did you not obey the Lord? Why did you pounce on the plunder and do evil in the eyes of the Lord?"* (1 Sam. 15:19) Saul then insists that he obeyed God, forgetting (conveniently) that his interpretation of the commands was different than what was actually given to him. Saul, like us, constantly tried to 'reinvent the rules" so that we are blameless- at least in our own eyes! His insistence though, rings hollow.: *"But I did obey the Lord," Saul said. "I went on the mission the Lord assigned me. I completely destroyed the Amalekites and brought*

back Agag their king. 21 The soldiers took sheep and cattle from the plunder, the best of what was devoted to God, in order to sacrifice them to the Lord your God at Gilgal." (1 Sam. 15:20-21) Samuel's reply was very telling:

But Samuel replied:
"Does the Lord delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices
as much as in obeying the Lord?
To obey is better than sacrifice,
and to heed is better than the fat of rams.
For rebellion is like the sin of divination,
and arrogance like the evil of idolatry.
Because you have rejected the word of the Lord,
he has rejected you as king."
Then Saul said to Samuel, "I have sinned. I violated the Lord's command and your instructions. I was afraid of the men and so I gave in to them. Now I beg you, forgive my sin and come back with me, so that I may worship the Lord." (1 Sam. 15:22-25).

Note that Saul is "asking for forgiveness rather than permission". He finally understood at least some of God's viewpoint and was sorry for his disobedience. God wanted- and demanded- obedience rather than sacrifice!

The penalty was severe- rejection of Saul as the king of Israel. Saul began to realize the enormity of what he had done, but begged Samuel to go with him so that he could still worship God: *Then Saul said to Samuel, "I have sinned. I violated the Lord's command and your instructions. I was afraid of the men and so I gave in to them. Now I beg you, forgive my sin and come back with me, so that I may worship the Lord." But Samuel said to him, "I will not go back with you. You have rejected the word of the Lord, and the Lord has rejected you as king over Israel!" As Samuel turned to leave, Saul caught hold of the hem of his robe, and it tore. Samuel said to him, "The Lord has torn the kingdom of Israel from you today and has given it to one of your neighbors—to one better than you. He who is the Glory of Israel does not lie or change his mind; for he is not a human being, that he should change his mind." Saul replied, "I have sinned. But please honor me before the elders of my people and before Israel; come back with me, so that I may worship the Lord your God." So Samuel went back with Saul, and Saul worshiped the Lord.* (1 Sam. 15:24-31).

Perhaps out of anger- or frustration- Saul kills Agag- king of the Amalekites. But from that point on Samuel did not see Saul- symbolic perhaps of God's abandoning Saul and his leadership: "*And Samuel put Agag to death before the Lord at Gilgal. Then Samuel left for Ramah, but Saul went up to his home in Gibeah of Saul. Until the day Samuel died, he did not go to see Saul again, though Samuel mourned for him. And the Lord regretted that he had made Saul king over Israel."* (1 Sam. 15:33b-35). It was "too little, too late"- the damage was irreparable, and God planned for another to be anointed.

Once Saul was rejected, God wasted no time in summoning Samuel to anoint another king for Israel: *"The Lord said to Samuel, "How long will you mourn for Saul, since I have rejected him as king over Israel? Fill your horn with oil and be on your*

way; I am sending you to Jesse of Bethlehem. I have chosen one of his sons to be king. "But Samuel said, "How can I go? If Saul hears about it, he will kill me." (1 Sam. 16:1-2) Samuel's concern was not misguided- Saul was certain to oppose another king being anointed, by Samuel or anyone else. So God gave Samuel a ruse to cover his real intentions- he told Samuel to go to Jesse in Bethlehem "to worship and make a sacrifice" (1 Sam. 16:2-5) Once Samuel reached Jesse, he told Jesses to present all his sons to him, one by one. A handsome lot they were- surely God had picked one of these! But each in succession was rejected- starting with the oldest, Elias. God told Samuel repeatedly that each was not the appointed one. His principle is one that is valuable to all of us and timeless: But the Lord said to Samuel, *"Do not consider his appearance or his height, for I have rejected him. The Lord does not look at the things people look at. People look at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart."* (1 Sam. 16:7) Samuel then asked "Are these all the sons you have?" (1 Sam. 16:11b). And then God's chosen is identified! *"There is still the youngest," Jesse answered. "He is tending the sheep." Samuel said, "Send for him; we will not sit down until he arrives." So he sent for him and had him brought in. He was glowing with health and had a fine appearance and handsome features. Then the Lord said, "Rise and anoint him; this is the one."* (1 Sam. 16:11b-12). And so King David is anointed- the "man after God's own heart" (1 Sam. 13:14) to be the chosen leader of Israel. The path ahead for David is not a smooth and effortless one- he was to be tested at every turn.

What follows is a statement in Scripture that has been hotly debated: Now the Spirit of the Lord had departed from Saul, and an evil[d] spirit from the Lord tormented him. (1 Sam. 16:14). Does God actually "send" evil? Can anything evil originate with God? Some theologians feel that God really "allowed" this evil to come over Saul, but did not actually cause it. The translation does not allow much latitude, however! (http://www.gotquestions.org/evil-spirit-Saul.html) Whatever the theological resolution might be, Saul suffered depression and anxiety, and David was employed to play the "harp (or lyre)" to soothe Saul's spirit (1 Sam. 16:15-16) So David was employed by Saul, and Saul developed a real liking for David: *"Then Saul sent word to Jesse, saying, "Allow David to remain in my service, for I am pleased with him." Whenever the spirit from God came on Saul, David would take up his lyre and play. Then relief would come to Saul; he would feel better, and the evil spirit would leave him."* (1 Sam. 16:22-23)

David Plays the Harp for Saul, by Rembrandt van Rijn, c. 1658.

Luke 14:25-35

What is the "true cost" of discipleship? In Dietrich Bonhoeffer's famous book, he criticizes what he calls "cheap grace". Jesus is not allowing anything "cheap:" here. His demands are hard to hear, and even harder to take to heart: "If anyone comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters —yes, even their own life—such a person cannot be my disciple. 27 And whoever does not carry their cross and follow me cannot be my disciple. (Luke 14:26-27). Jesus assures us that we must "count the cost" so that we don't begin half-heartedly or unprepared: *"Suppose one of you wants to build a tower. Won't you first sit down and estimate the cost to see if you have enough money to complete it? 29 For if you lay the foundation and are not able to finish it, everyone who sees it will ridicule you, 30 saying, 'This person began to build and wasn't able to finish.'* (Luke 14:28-30). It doesn't count with God to have "good intentions"- the obedient life is a daily exercise in following His voice and His plan for us. The rewards are enormous! We can become "salt" and add excitement and flavor to our lives and those around us, but we must have a daily walk with Him- and be filled with the Spirit- to accomplish this: (Luke 14:34b-35)

1 Samuel 17-18 April 15, 2014 Luke 15:1-10

David and Goliath…what child raised in the church hasn't heard the story? The whole story, however, is seldom told to children…too much blood and gore- too

much reality in the jealousy that was generated in Saul about the heroic David. Goliath was a true giant- estimated at some 9 feet tall…and was a seasoned warrior with a spear: “like a weaver’s rod, and its iron point weighed six hundred shekels.” (1 Sam. 17:7). He taunted the army of Israel, and offered to fight a “champion” from the army of God to decide the battle. He said to them: *“Choose a man and have him come down to me. If he is able to fight and kill me, we will become your subjects; but if I overcome him and kill him, you will become our subjects and serve us.” Then the Philistine said, “This day I defy the armies of Israel! Give me a man and let us fight each other.” 11 On hearing the Philistine’s words, Saul and all the Israelites were dismayed and terrified.”* (1 Sam. 17:8b-11) David’s brothers were in the army of Israel, but he was too young to fight and was tending the sheep. His father Jesse sent him to his brothers with food: *Now Jesse said to his son David, “Take this ephah of roasted grain and these ten loaves of bread for your brothers and hurry to their camp. Take along these ten cheeses to the commander of their unit. See how your brothers are and bring back some assurance[e] from them. They are with Saul and all the men of Israel in the Valley of Elah, fighting against the Philistines.”* (1 Sam. 17:17-19) When David arrived, he was in disbelief and dismay that the army of God had not eliminated this Philistine champion: “What will be done for the man who kills this Philistine and removes this disgrace from Israel? Who is this uncircumcised Philistine that he should defy the armies of the living God?” (1 Sam. 17:26b). Saul had offered a reward to the man who could kill this enemy of God: “The king will give great wealth to the man who kills him. He will also give him his daughter in marriage and will exempt his family from taxes in Israel.” (1 Sam. 17:25). I can’t imagine that either “reward” would have been tempting to David- he was far to young to marry and was more interested in the honor of God than money. But David’s outrage at the insults from this Philistine were a driving force in his courageous response: *“Let no one lose heart on account of this Philistine; your servant will go and fight him.” Saul replied, “You are not able to go out against this Philistine and fight him; you are only a young man, and he has been a warrior from his youth.” But David said to Saul, “Your servant has been keeping his father’s sheep. When a lion or a bear came and carried off a sheep from the flock, I went after it, struck it and rescued the sheep from its mouth. When it turned on me, I seized it by its hair, struck it and killed it. Your servant has killed both the lion and the bear; this uncircumcised Philistine will be like one of them, because he has defied the armies of the living God. The Lord who rescued me from the paw of the lion and the paw of the bear will rescue me from the hand of this Philistine.” Saul said to David, “Go, and the Lord be with you.”* (1 Sam. 17:34b-37). They key to David’s courage was his complete trust in God, and his experience of God’s deliverance from the wild animals that threatened his sheep. Besides, this Philistine had defied the armies “of the living God”- enough motivation for a courageous and righteous person like David.

Rejecting Saul’s armor, he simple gathered “smooth stones” for his slingshot. (1 Sam. 17:40). Goliath was incredulous: *“Am I a dog, that you come at me with sticks?” And the Philistine cursed David by his gods. “Come here,” he said, “and I’ll give your flesh to the birds and the wild animals!”* (1 Sam. 17:43b-44). David’s words were truly amazing and wonderful:

“You come against me with sword and spear and javelin, but I come against you in the name of the Lord Almighty, the God of the armies of Israel, whom you have defied. This day the Lord will deliver you into my hands, and I’ll strike you down and

cut off your head. This very day I will give the carcasses of the Philistine army to the birds and the wild animals, and the whole world will know that there is a God in Israel. All those gathered here will know that it is not by sword or spear that the Lord saves; for the battle is the Lord's, and he will give all of you into our hands." (1 Sam. 17:45b-47). David's trust was not in his own skill or strength- which was considerable- but in the trustworthiness and power of the Living God! Most of the time this story is told to children, we leave of the "cutting off your head" part- although this was a common practice for a defeated enemy. The victory was swift and complete: *"As the Philistine moved closer to attack him, David ran quickly toward the battle line to meet him. Reaching into his bag and taking out a stone, he slung it and struck the Philistine on the forehead. The stone sank into his forehead, and he fell facedown on the ground. So David triumphed over the Philistine with a sling and a stone; without a sword in his hand he struck down the Philistine and killed him. David ran and stood over him. He took hold of the Philistine's sword and drew it from the sheath. After he killed him, he cut off his head with the sword. When the Philistines saw that their hero was dead, they turned and ran. Then the men of Israel and Judah surged forward with a shout and pursued the Philistines to the entrance of Gath and to the gates of Ekron. Their dead were strewn along the Shaaraim road to Gath and Ekron. When the Israelites returned from chasing the Philistines, they plundered their camp."* (1 Sam. 17:48-53) Saul immediately asked where this young man had come from, and whose family he was part of, so Saul asked Abner, commander of his army: *"Find out whose son this young man is." As soon as David returned from killing the Philistine, Abner took him and brought him before Saul, with David still holding the Philistine's head. "Whose son are you, young man?" Saul asked him. David said, "I am the son of your servant Jesse of Bethlehem."* (1 Sam. 17:56b-58) Unfortunately for David, this was the beginning of great jealousy of David's accomplishments on the part of Saul. Saul on the one hand was delighted with this courageous young champion, bet he was also threatened by him. Was this the leader God had chosen to replace him?

One wonderful thing that did happen shortly after this unlikely sounding victory was the close friendship that developed between Jonathan- Saul's son- and David: *"After David had finished talking with Saul, Jonathan became one in spirit with David, and he loved him as himself. From that day Saul kept David with him and did not let him return home to his family. And Jonathan made a covenant with David because he loved him as himself. Jonathan took off the robe he was wearing and gave it to David, along with his tunic, and even his sword, his bow and his belt."* (1 Sam. 18:1-4) Saul gave David a high rank in his army, an action that: "pleased all the troops, and Saul's officers as well." (1 Sam. 18:5b). Another disturbing thing, to Saul at least, is that the people held David in higher esteem than they did Saul: *"When the men were returning home after David had killed the Philistine, the women came out from all the towns of Israel to meet King Saul with singing and dancing, with joyful songs and with timbrels and lyres. As they danced, they sang:*

"Saul has slain his thousands,

and David his tens of thousands."

Saul was very angry; this refrain displeased him greatly. "They have credited David with tens of thousands," he thought, "but me with only thousands. What more can he get but the kingdom?" And from that time on Saul kept a close eye on David." (1 Sam. 18:6-9) So instead of pleasure or delight at the great gifts David had, Saul became "angry" and decided to "keep a close eye on David".

Remember the offer of “my daughter in marriage” that Saul had made? He now wished to make good on his promise, but Saul’s older daughter was given in marriage to “Adrial of Meholah” (1 Sam. 18:19), partly because David had said to Saul: “Who am I, and what is my family or my clan in Israel, that I should become the king’s son-in-law?” (1 Sam. 18:18b). Saul saw an opportunity to get rid of David- his second daughter Michal was in love with David, and Saul planned to ask David to perform a herculean task to earn her hand- one that was certain to result in his death: *“Now Saul’s daughter Michal was in love with David, and when they told Saul about it, he was pleased. “I will give her to him,” he thought, “so that she may be a snare to him and so that the hand of the Philistines may be against him.” So Saul said to David, “Now you have a second opportunity to become my son-in-law.” Then Saul ordered his attendants: “Speak to David privately and say, ‘Look, the king likes you, and his attendants all love you; now become his son-in-law.’” They repeated these words to David. But David said, “Do you think it is a small matter to become the king’s son-in-law? I’m only a poor man and little known.” When Saul’s servants told him what David had said, Saul replied, “Say to David, ‘The king wants no other price for the bride than a hundred Philistine foreskins, to take revenge on his enemies.’” Saul’s plan was to have David fall by the hands of the Philistines.* (1 Sam. 18:20-25) Much to Saul’s great disappointment, and probably to Michal’s delight, David more than succeeded in meeting the demands of his soon-to be father-in-law! When David returned with 200 foreskins, instead of the 100 demanded (this is another part of the story that’s not very child-friendly!), he won Michal’s hand in marriage. And the Scripture tells us: *“When Saul realized that the Lord was with David and that his daughter Michal loved David, 29 Saul became still more afraid of him, and he remained his enemy the rest of his days. 30 The Philistine commanders continued to go out to battle, and as often as they did, David met with more success than the rest of Saul’s officers, and his name became well known.”* (1 Sam. 18: 28-30). So Saul’s plans failed, David’s more than succeeded, and the stage was now set for a protracted conflict between the King and the anointed “king in waiting”.

Gustave Dore: David and Goliath

Luke 15:1-10

"Lost"- the theme of three parables Jesus told His followers- 1) the lost sheep, 2) the lost coin; and 3) the lost (prodigal) son. Jesus is trying to get His followers- and us- to see how precious each of us is to the Father, and how there is "great rejoicing in heaven" when one who was lost "is found" (Luke 15:7). The first story is a deceptively simple one- about a lost sheep. Ninety nine are safe and accounted for, but the Shepherd seeks out, and finds, the one that was lost. His words are joyful: "*Rejoice with me; I have found my lost sheep."* (Luke 7:6b). Then we see these wonderful and comforting words: *"I tell you that in the same way there will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who do not need to repent."* (Luke 15:7). I have always wondered if I had heard the story if I would have been honest enough to identify with the "one that was lost" than the "ninety nine who were righteous"!

The story of the lost coin is similar. In those days, a woman often was given a dowry in silver coins. Sometimes these were made into a necklace or other adornment. Losing one of these silver coins would have been very disturbing and upsetting! As we see in the website http://www.sharefaith.com/guide/christian-ministries/ministry-of-jesus/the-lost-coin--parables-of-jesus.html, "The 10 coins or pieces of silver weren't worth very much monetarily, but were of great sentimental value. These pieces of silver were a gift from her husband's family, which she would put in her hair on very special occasions, such as their 25th wedding anniversary. She might wear them while her husband was away to remind her of his love. These pieces were to be worn with five pieces on each side of her head, fastened with little hooks. To lose one piece would be shameful and devastating." Once again, finding that which was lost is a cause of true rejoicing: *'Rejoice with me; I have found my lost coin.'* (Luke 15:9). And once again Jesus points out the "rejoicing in heaven" over finding the one who was lost (Luke 15:10)

1 Samuel 19-21 April 16, 2014 Luke 15:11-32

Kill David? Why? But that was Saul's intent. He was no longer able to tolerate the presence of his young rival. Jonathan, however, who had a great love for David, warned David that he was in danger. *"My father Saul is looking for a chance to kill you. Be on your guard tomorrow morning; go into hiding and stay there. I will go out and stand with my father in the field where you are. I'll speak to him about you and will tell you what I find out." Jonathan spoke well of David to Saul his father and said to him, "Let not the king do wrong to his servant David; he has not wronged you, and what he has done has benefited you greatly. He took his life in his hands when he killed the Philistine. The Lord won a great victory for all Israel, and you saw it and were glad. Why then would you do wrong to an innocent man like David by killing him for no reason?" Saul listened to Jonathan and took this oath: "As surely as the Lord lives, David will not be put to death."* (1 Samuel 19:2b-6) This time Saul changed his mind.

But then: *"an evil spirit from the Lord came on Saul as he was sitting in his house with his spear in his hand. While David was playing the lyre, Saul tried to pin him to the wall with his spear, but David eluded him as Saul drove the spear into the wall. That night David made good his escape."* (1 Sam. 19:9b-10) Here we are again, faced with the "evil spirit from the Lord"! Maybe the writer of Samuel wasn't a good psychologist, or mistook something God allowed with something He sent! Once again Saul tried to eliminate David, but this time David's wife Michal saved him (1 Sam. 19:11-17). God certainly had His hand on David, and had great future plans for him. Then David fled to Samuel, who was with a group of prophets. All the men Saul sent after David were overcome with the "Spirit of God" and started prophesying…eventually Saul himself was filled with the Spirit and prophesied as well (as he had earlier) such that people said: *"Is Saul also among the prophets?"* (1 Sam. 19:24).

Once again. David had escaped Saul's plans on his life and his jealous wrath. David sought out Jonathan, and asked him to "test the waters" with his father Saul to see what Saul's true attitude was toward David. David still could not understand why Saul wished him any harm, but he was understandably cautious around him (1 Sam. 20:1-15). Jonathan's pledge to David was heartfelt: *"May the Lord call David's enemies to account." And Jonathan had David reaffirm his oath out of love for him, because he loved him as he loved himself."* (1 Sam. 20:16b-17) As little as I want to broach this subject, some "modern" readers have speculated that David and Jonathan had a homosexual relationship. From the point of view of these readers, it is simply not reasonable for Jonathan to love David "as himself" (1 Sam. 20:17) without there being a sexual component to this love. (http://www.wouldjesusdiscriminate.org/biblical_evidence/david_jonathan.html) This view is distinctly in the minority, and has been proposed only since societal acceptance of homosexuality has increased (http://pleaseconvinceme.com/2012/were-david-and-jonathan-homosexual-lovers/).

David and Jonathan agreed on a sign. If after dining with his father Saul, Jonathan determined that Saul wanted to kill David, he would shoot arrows in a preselected filed and tell his "assistant" -a small boy- that the arrows were "beyond him". If Saul were not angry, then Jonathan would tell the boy the arrows were "on this side of you". When Jonathan found out the depths of Saul's anger, he gave the prescribed signal to the young boy- "the arrows are beyond you." Then David, who had been in hiding, came to Jonathan, bowed down to him three times, and they both wept, but "David the most" (1 Sam. 20:18-41). The two then parted: "Jonathan said to David, "Go in peace, for we have sworn friendship with each other in the name of the Lord, saying, 'The Lord is witness between you and me, and between your descendants and my descendants forever.'" Then David left, and Jonathan went back to the town." (1 Sam. 20:42b).

David then went to Nob, and sought out the priest Ahimelek. Ahimelek was troubled to see David and asked: *"Why are you alone? Why is no one with you?" David answered Ahimelek the priest, "The king sent me on a mission and said to me, 'No one is to know anything about the mission I am sending you on.' As for my men, I have told them to meet me at a certain place. Now then, what do you have on hand? Give me five loaves of bread, or whatever you can find." But the priest*

answered David, "I don't have any ordinary bread on hand; however, there is some consecrated bread here—provided the men have kept themselves from women." (1 Sam 21:1b-4) We will see this story later referred to by Jesus, when He was accused by the Pharisees of "harvesting and eating grain" on the Sabbath (Matthew 12:34; Mark 2:23-28).

Enter Doeg the Edomite…we will see more of him later in the story. He was "Saul's chief shepherd" (1 Sam. 21:7b), and may have been spying on David for Saul. Then David, clearly on a "stealth" mission to flee from Saul, saw the need for a weapon to defend himself with: *"David asked Ahimelek, "Don't you have a spear or a sword here? I haven't brought my sword or any other weapon, because the king's mission was urgent." The priest replied, "The sword of Goliath the Philistine, whom you killed in the Valley of Elah, is here; it is wrapped in a cloth behind the ephod. If you want it, take it; there is no sword here but that one." David said, "There is none like it; give it to me."* (1 Sam 21:8-9) The David traveled to Gath- the site of Goliath's birth- and sought out Achish, the Philistine king (like a mayor) of Gath. It seems strange that David would seek refuge in the form of an enemy- a Philistine no less, but David had a clever plan- he would fake madness and thus appear to be harmless. So convincing was his "act" that Achish remarked *"Look at the man! He is insane! Why bring him to me? Am I so short of madmen that you have to bring this fellow here to carry on like this in front of me? Must this man come into my house?"* (1 Sam. 21:14b-15) David, for the time being at least, was out of the grasp of Saul.

Luke 15:11-32

The story/parable of the :lost son" is the third of the lost stories. Many have called this the Prodigal Son, since the young man in question is "prodigal" (spending money or resources freely and recklessly; wastefully extravagant) since that's how the younger son spent his inheritance. Some have said this story is unrealistic, since it was not the custom for children- least of all one not "first born" to inherit anything prior to a parent's death. As stated in the Wikipedia article (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Parable_of_the_Prodigal_Son) "The request of the younger son for his share of the inheritance is "brash, even insolent" and "tantamount to wishing that the father were dead." His actions do not lead to success, and he eventually becomes an indentured servant, with the degrading job of looking after pigs, and even envying them for the carob pods they eat."

The story is a beautiful and touching depiction of the moment the younger son "comes to himself" and realizes how deeply he has sinned and strayed from his loving relationship with his father*: "When he came to his senses, he said, 'How many of my father's hired servants have food to spare, and here I am starving to death! I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired servants.' So he got up and went to his father".* (Like 15:17-20) How often God must lone for us to "return to Him"! The next part of the story is amazing and always brings at least a tear to my eyes. *"But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him. "The son said to him,*

'Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.' "But the father said to his servants, 'Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let's have a feast and celebrate. For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.' So they began to celebrate." (Luke 15:20b-24). The father RAN to his son, and instead of rebuking him, or reciting to him how terrible he had acted, he hugged, him, kissed him and rejoiced! I am reminded so often of Ephesians 2 when I read or hear this parable: "*As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient. All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our flesh[a] and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were by nature deserving of wrath. But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions —it is by grace you have been saved. And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus, in order that in the coming ages he might show the incomparable riches of his grace, expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus. For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God— not by works, so that no one can boast. For we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do."* Ephesians 2:1-10) In Paul's letter to the Ephesians, he clearly states that "all of us" were undeserving…but that God "rich in mercy" saved us- literally from ourselves!

Instead of rejection- we receive mercy, instead of a deserved punishment, we are "raised up"; instead of "self-made" salvation, we receive our very faith as a "gift from God"!

And now we see the older brother- resentful, angry, feeling "entitled" to a celebration of his own and standing in judgment not only of his brother but of his father's mercy. And then he is told simply and clearly*: "'My son,' the father said, 'you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. But we had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.'"* (Luke 15:31b-32). May I always have the humility and gratitude of the younger brother, and carefully and willfully avoid the smugness, self-righteousness and entitlement of the older!

The Return of the Prodigal Son (1773) by Pompeo Batoni

1 Samuel 22-24 April 17, 2014 Luke 16:1-18

Escape…run wherever there is refuge and safety…this is what David did as he fled from Saul's wrath. First David stayed for a while at the cave of Adullam. There: *"those who were in distress or in debt or discontented gathered around him, and he became their commander. About four hundred men were with him."* (1 Sam. 22:2) Then David went to the king of Moab to seek refuge, but was told he would not be safe there by a "prophet" and so fled to Judah. *"But the prophet Gad said to David, "Do not stay in the stronghold. Go into the land of Judah." So David left and went to the forest of Hereth."* (1 Sam. 22:5).

Meanwhile Saul was tracking down those who had assisted David, including Ahimelek the priest. Doeg the Edomite told the tale: *"I saw the son of Jesse come to Ahimelek son of Ahitub at Nob. Ahimelek inquired of the LORD for him; he also gave him provisions and the sword of Goliath the Philistine."* (1 Sam. 22:9b-10) And Saul demanded that Ahimelek explain his "treason" in helping David. Ahimelek tried to explain that he had no reason to doubt David's loyalty to Saul: *"Who of all your servants is as loyal as David, the king's son-in-law, captain of your bodyguard and highly respected in your household? Was that day the first time I inquired of God for him? Of course not! Let not the king accuse your servant or any of his father's family, for your servant knows nothing at all about this whole affair."* (1 Sam. 22:14b-15) From Saul's point of view this was treason punishable by death: "But the king said, "You will surely die, Ahimelek, you and your whole family." (1 Sam. 22:16), Saul's men were understandable reluctant to kill a priest and his family, but Doeg was up to the task*: "So Doeg the Edomite turned and struck them down. That day he killed eighty-five men who wore the linen ephod. He also put to the sword Nob, the town of the priests, with its men and women, its children and infants, and its cattle, donkeys and sheep."* (1 Sam. 22:18b-19)

One son of Ahimelek- Abiathar, escaped and fled to David for safety: *"one son of Ahimelek son of Ahitub, named Abiathar, escaped and fled to join David. He told David that Saul had killed the priests of the Lord. Then David said to Abiathar, "That day, when Doeg the Edomite was there, I knew he would be sure to tell Saul. I am responsible for the death of your whole family. Stay with me; don't be afraid. The man who wants to kill you is trying to kill me too. You will be safe with me."* (1 Sam. 22:20b-23)

David then found that the Philistines were "looting the threshing floors" at Keliah. He asked of the Lord if he should come to their aid, and was given a clear message from God: he inquired of the Lord, saying, "Shall I go and attack these Philistines?" The Lord answered him, "Go, attack the Philistines and save Keilah." (1 Sam 23:2b). Even though David had this assurance from God, his men were afraid- they were even uneasy about being in Judah. God, however, was as good as His word and delivered the Philistines to David and his men: *"Once again David inquired of the Lord, and the Lord answered him, "Go down to Keilah, for I am going to give the Philistines into your hand." So David and his men went to Keilah, fought the Philistines and carried off their livestock. He inflicted heavy losses on the Philistines and saved the people of Keilah. (Now Abiathar son of Ahimelek had brought the ephod down with him when he fled to David at Keilah.)"* (1 Sam. 23:4b-6) In delivering Keliah, David had entered a city with "gates and bars" (1 Sam. 23:7b), and Saul mistakenly thought that would help capture David. However, david again inquired of the Lord and found out that the people of Keliah would indeed turn him over to Saul – his help came through Abiathar the priest: *"When David learned that Saul was plotting against him, he said to Abiathar the priest, "Bring the ephod." David said, "Lord, God of Israel, your servant has heard definitely that Saul plans to come to Keilah and destroy the town on account of me. Will the citizens of Keilah surrender me to him? Will Saul come down, as your servant has heard? Lord, God of Israel, tell your servant." And the Lord said, "He will." Again David asked, "Will the citizens of Keilah surrender me and my men to Saul?" And the Lord said, "They will." So David and his men, about six hundred in number, left Keilah and kept moving from place to place. When Saul was told that David had escaped from Keilah, he did not go there."* (1 Sam. 23:9b-13)

David then took refuge in the wilderness: *"David stayed in the wilderness strongholds and in the hills of the Desert of Ziph. Day after day Saul searched for him, but God did not give David into his hands."* (1 Sam. 23:14) David's friend Jonathan visited him and tried to offer encouragement:: *" While David was at Horesh in the Desert of Ziph, he learned that[a] Saul had come out to take his life. And Saul's son Jonathan went to David at Horesh and helped him find strength in God. "Don't be afraid," he said. "My father Saul will not lay a hand on you. You will be king over Israel, and I will be second to you. Even my father Saul knows this." The two of them made a covenant before the Lord. Then Jonathan went home, but David remained at Horesh."* (1 Sam. 23:15b-18) The nearby residents – the "Ziphites" offered to turn David over to Saul, and Saul pursued David. At one point Saul was on one side of a mountain and David on the other, but Saul received an

urgent message about a Philistine raid and broke off the pursuit (1 Sa. 23:19-28). This is certainly evidence of how God uses circumstances to accomplish His will- in this case preserving David's life so he can later serve as king of Israel. David then went to the "strongholds of En Gedi" (1 Sam. 23:29).

So Saul struck out with 3000 men to look for David among the "Crags of the Wild Goats" (1 Sa. 24:2) in En Gedi. Then Saul made a tactical error- he went into a cave unaccompanied: *"He came to the sheep pens along the way; a cave was there, and Saul went in to relieve himself. David and his men were far back in the cave. The men said, "This is the day the Lord spoke of when he said[b] to you, 'I will give your enemy into your hands for you to deal with as you wish.'" Then David crept up unnoticed and cut off a corner of Saul's robe."* (1 Sam. 24:3-4) David was conscience stricken after cutting off the corner of Saul's robe- in his eyes he had done an evil thing to "the Lord's anointed" and wished to ask forgiveness of Saul: *"Then David went out of the cave and called out to Saul, "My lord the king!" When Saul looked behind him, David bowed down and prostrated himself with his face to the ground. He said to Saul, "Why do you listen when men say, 'David is bent on harming you'? This day you have seen with your own eyes how the Lord delivered you into my hands in the cave. Some urged me to kill you, but I spared you; I said, 'I will not lay my hand on my lord, because he is the Lord's anointed.' See, my father, look at this piece of your robe in my hand! I cut off the corner of your robe but did not kill you. See that there is nothing in my hand to indicate that I am guilty of wrongdoing or rebellion. I have not wronged you, but you are hunting me down to take my life. May the Lord judge between you and me. And may the Lord avenge the wrongs you have done to me, but my hand will not touch you. As the old saying goes, 'From evildoers come evil deeds,' so my hand will not touch you."* (1 Sam. 24:8-13)Notice that David addresses Saul respectfully, as "father" and asks the Lord to judge between them. Davis shows amazing restraint and respect for the rightfully appointed king of Israel. Saul is touched and impressed that David : *"May the LORD reward you well for the way you treated me today. I know that you will surely be king and that the kingdom of Israel will be established in your hands. Now swear to me by the LORD that you will not kill off my descendants or wipe out my name from my father's family." So David gave his oath to Saul. Then Saul returned home, but David and his men went up to the stronghold."* (1 Sam. 24:19b-22). This battle between the king and king-to-be was not over!

David crept up unnoticed and cut off a corner of Saul's robe

Luke 16:1-18

The story in Luke about the “shrewd manager” is difficult to digest or assimilate at first. The very things that the ethical underpinnings of the Gospel promote- honesty, transparency, fairness and accountability- are seemingly contradicted in this story/parable. The “shrewd” manager is seemingly applauded for his trickery and deceit: *“The master commended the dishonest manager because he had acted shrewdly. For the people of this world are more shrewd in dealing with their own kind than are the people of the light. I tell you, use worldly wealth to gain friends for yourselves, so that when it is gone, you will be welcomed into eternal dwellings.”* (Luke 16:8-9). One of the best explanations I have found is on the website “GotQuestions?” (http://www.gotquestions.org/parable-unjust-steward.html#ixzz2ysj7m6NS) which states: “So the principle that Jesus is trying to convey is one of a just steward rather than an unjust one. The unjust steward saw his master’s resources as a means for his own personal enjoyment and advancement. Conversely, Jesus wants His followers to be just, righteous stewards. If we understand the principle that everything we own is a gift from God, then we realize that God is the owner of everything and that we are His stewards. As such, we are to use the Master’s resources to further the Master’s goals. In this specific case, we are to be generous with our wealth and use it for the benefit of others.

Jesus then goes on to expand in verses 10-13 the principle given in v. 9. If one is faithful in "little" (i.e., 'unrighteous' wealth), then one will be faithful in much. Similarly, if one is dishonest in little, he will also be dishonest in much. If we can't be faithful with earthly wealth, which isn't even ours to begin with, then how can we be entrusted with "true riches?" The true riches here is referring to stewardship and responsibility in God's kingdom along with all the accompanying heavenly rewards."

They key seems to be in realizing who the audience of this parable was- the disciples as well as the "Pharisees and teachers of the law". Notice Jesus address to them at the end of the story, in which the Pharisees, who "loved" money were being criticized by Jesus. So instead of an "upside down morality", Jesus is really teaching profoundly about the value of things, and the values and priorities- right or wrong- that we attach to them*. "The Pharisees, who loved money, heard all this and were sneering at Jesus. He said to them, "You are the ones who justify yourselves in the eyes of others, but God knows your hearts. What people value highly is detestable in God's sight."* (Luke 16:14-15)

Jesus then goes on to teach about the "News of the Kingdom of God"- that it began with the preaching and teaching of John the Baptist, and that the Law will not "disappear"…Jesus was truly the complete fulfillment- not the abolishment- of the Law. *"The Law and the Prophets were proclaimed until John. Since that time, the good news of the kingdom of God is being preached, and everyone is forcing their way into it. It is easier for heaven and earth to disappear than for the least stroke of a pen to drop out of the Law."* (Luke 16:16-17) Then Jesus makes a statement that has been disturbing- or even offsetting- to many in the church: "Anyone who divorces his wife and marries another woman commits adultery, and the man who marries a divorced woman commits adultery." (Luke 16:18). As a man who has done both of these things: 1) divorce a woman (although technically I was sued for divorce and did not initiate proceedings); and 2) marry a divorced woman, I am sure to try to understand this teaching. After all, the Scripture makes it clear that "adulterers" will not inherit the Kingdom (1 Cor. 6:9 and others). Surely Jesus' statement should be taken in the context of what a "permissible" divorce would be – such as adultery
(https://www.cbn.com/spirituallife/cbnteachingsheets/Divorce_And_Remarriage.aspx
)
This would effectively bail me out, since my first wife was guilty of, and admitted, multiple adulterous relationships. The fact that I married a divorced woman, however, is not so easily dealt with- unless I use the same basis for her divorce which was an adulterous relationship of her former husband (which was apparently the case). The Scripture does not directly address remarriage of two parties- both of which have "Scriptural" grounds for divorce. I must believe that any sin- however great or small- is important to God, and that my repentance for this sin should be an acceptable remedy. This "repentance", in my view, should not include the additional sin of another divorce so that both myself and my wife would no longer be married! I suppose I should seek the counsel of my pastor, who is himself married to a divorced woman.

1 Samuel 25-26 April 18, 2014 Luke 16:19-31

The end of an era! Samuel has passed from the earth, and his godly, centering influence was no longer available. He was missed so much, in fact, that Saul sought him later when he consulted the witch/medium of Endor (1 Sam. 28:3). Samuel's godly counsel was now unavailable*: "Now Samuel died, and all Israel assembled and mourned for him; and they buried him at his home in Ramah. Then David moved down into the Desert of Paran."* (1 Sam. 25:1).

David decided to ask a favor of Nabal, a "Calebite". His shephreds needed provisions, and he sent them to ask for them, and told them to remind Nabal of the favor that he owed them. The situation got very ugly very fast, fundamentally because Nabal was "surly and mean in his dealings" (1 Sam. 25:3). The story unfolds: *"While David was in the wilderness, he heard that Nabal was shearing sheep. So he sent ten young men and said to them, "Go up to Nabal at Carmel and greet him in my name.Say to him: 'Long life to you! Good health to you and your household! And good health to all that is yours! "'Now I hear that it is sheep-shearing time. When your shepherds were with us, we did not mistreat them, and the whole time they were at Carmel nothing of theirs was missing. Ask your own servants and they will tell you. Therefore be favorable toward my men, since we come at a festive time. Please give your servants and your son David whatever you can find for them.'" When David's men arrived, they gave Nabal this message in David's name. Then they waited. Nabal answered David's servants, "Who is this David? Who is this son of Jesse? Many servants are breaking away from their masters these days. Why should I take my bread and water, and the meat I have slaughtered for my shearers, and give it to men coming from who knows where?" David's men turned around and went back. When they arrived, they reported every word. David said to his men, "Each of you strap on your sword!" So they did, and David strapped his on as well. About four hundred men went up with David, while two hundred stayed with the supplies."* (1 Sam. 25:4-13) The saying goes "No good deed ever goes unpunished"- David's favorable treatment of Nabal's shepherds was not enough to elicit the same in return, and David was infuriated with the shoddy treatment his men received. One of the servants of Nabal told Abigail, Nabal's wife about the incident, and she acted quickly. She "*took two hundred loaves of bread, two skins of wine, five dressed sheep, five seahs of roasted grain, a hundred cakes of raisins and two hundred cakes of pressed figs, and loaded them on donkeys. Then she told her servants, "Go on ahead; I'll follow you." But she did not tell her husband Nabal."* (1 Sam. 25:18b-19). Hopefully by humbly offering gifts to David she could avert a catastrophe! David heard her request, and was taken by her humility and sense of fairness: *"David said to Abigail, "Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel, who has sent you today to meet me. May you be blessed for your good judgment and for keeping me from bloodshed this day and from avenging myself with my own hands. Otherwise, as surely as the Lord, the God of Israel, lives, who has kept me from harming you, if you had not come quickly to meet me, not one male belonging to Nabal would have been left alive by daybreak." Then David accepted from her hand what she had brought him and said, "Go home in peace. I have heard your words and granted your request."* (1 Sam. 25:32b-35)
Crisis averted! Abigail went to tell her husband about the successful journey, and David's kindness in sparing them, but he was not receptive: *"When Abigail went to Nabal, he was in the house holding a banquet like that of a king. He was in high spirits and very drunk. So she told him nothing at all until daybreak. Then in the morning, when Nabal was sober, his wife told him all these things, and his heart*

failed him and he became like a stone. About ten days later, the Lord struck Nabal and he died." (1 Sam. 25:36-38). God's judgment on Nabal was death, and Nabal's death turned out to be a blessing to Abigail, for David had decided to take her as his wife! Out of the bad, God makes good…out of disaster- triumph. The Scripture tells us: *"When David heard that Nabal was dead, he said, "Praise be to the Lord, who has upheld my cause against Nabal for treating me with contempt. He has kept his servant from doing wrong and has brought Nabal's wrongdoing down on his own head." Then David sent word to Abigail, asking her to become his wife. His servants went to Carmel and said to Abigail, "David has sent us to you to take you to become his wife."* (1 Sam. 25:39-40)

Saul continued to hunt for David- despite his pledge to David that he would not seek his death. When Saul heard David and his men were at the "hill of Hikelah" (1 Sam 26:1) in the Desert of Zin, he took 3000 troops with him. David sent out scouts to verify that Saul was indeed nearby (1 Sam. 26: 2-4). David sought out Saul, and found him asleep in the middle of the encampment, with Abner, his general, asleep nearby. Abishai, David's trusted companion, saw this as an opportunity for David to rid himself of the constant threat posed by Saul- hadn't God delivered Saul into David;s hands? *"Abishai said to David, "Today God has delivered your enemy into your hands. Now let me pin him to the ground with one thrust of the spear; I won't strike him twice." But David said to Abishai, "Don't destroy him! Who can lay a hand on the Lord's anointed and be guiltless? As surely as the Lord lives," he said, "the Lord himself will strike him, or his time will come and he will die, or he will go into battle and perish. But the Lord forbid that I should lay a hand on the Lord's anointed. Now get the spear and water jug that are near his head, and let's go."* (1 Sam 26:8-11) David simply could not kill the "Lord's anointed"- to do so would be to act as if God had made an error in anointing Saul. So David and Abishai simply took the spear and water jug- to prove they had been near Saul- and departed. None of Saul's men or Saul himself noticed or awoke, because God had put them in a "deep sleep" (1 Sam. 26:12b).

David then called to Abner, and asked him: "Aren't you going to answer me, Abner?" (1 Sam. 26:14b). Abner was surprised that David was so close! David then accused Abner of neglecting his duty to protect the King: David said, "You're a man, aren't you? And who is like you in Israel? Why didn't you guard your lord the king? Someone came to destroy your lord the king. 16 What you have done is not good. As surely as the Lord lives, you and your men must die, because you did not guard your master, the Lord's anointed. Look around you. Where are the king's spear and water jug that were near his head?" (1 Sam. 26:15-16). Then Saul recognized David's voice and called out to him: "Is that your voice, David my son?" (1 Sam. 26:17b). David then told Saul that he was pursuing him for no reason- David assured Saul that he was not a threat. And Saul, realizing his error, confessed and promised not to hunt David anymore. *"I have sinned. Come back, David my son. Because you considered my life precious today, I will not try to harm you again. Surely I have acted like a fool and have been terribly wrong." "Here is the king's spear," David answered. "Let one of your young men come over and get it. The Lord rewards everyone for their righteousness and faithfulness. The Lord delivered you into my hands today, but I would not lay a hand on the Lord's anointed. As surely as I valued your life today, so may the Lord value my life and deliver me from all trouble." Then Saul said to David, "May you be blessed, David my son; you will do*

great things and surely triumph." (1 Sam. 26:21-25) I have often wondered if Saul really had given up on his own leadership and appointment by God- surely he could see the signs that his authority, and certainly his blessing from God, were slipping away. How hard it is for those in power to relinquish that power, no matter the circumstances.

Luke 16:19-31

The rich man…a picture of health, comfort and ease. Like so many who don't need God for "anything", he became comfortable with his life and ignored the Kingdom of God. The poor man, Lazarus, was the earthly opposite. His life was one of misery and constant need- but he loved and honored God with his life. The Scripture describes it this way: *"There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and lived in luxury every day. At his gate was laid a beggar named Lazarus, covered with sores and longing to eat what fell from the rich man's table. Even the dogs came and licked his sores."* (Luke 16:19-21) Then the inevitable- death- came to both men, and they discovered their positions were reversed. The rich man was in torment, and the poor man was carried by angels "to Abraham's side" (Luke 16:22b).

The rich man, in his torment, asked for the poor man to send him relief from his suffering:" In Hades, where he was in torment, he looked up and saw Abraham far away, with Lazarus by his side. 24 So he called to him, 'Father Abraham, have pity on me and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue, because I am in agony in this fire.' (Luke 16:23-24). But the punishment was not to be relieved, and Abraham told him: '*Son, remember that in your lifetime you received your good things, while Lazarus received bad things, but now he is comforted here and you are in agony."* (Luke 16:25b) Besides, there was a "chasm" between them that could not be crossed! (Luke 16:26). The chasm was the direct result of the actions and lives of the two while alive on earth- the one depended on God for everything- the other for nothing. But God rewards those who love Him and call on His Name! And the flip side is, He separates Himself forever from those who ignore Him and live their lives without Him.

Then tell my living relatives, the rich man pleaded- send someone from the dead to warn them! But Abraham's reply was very clear and authoritative: *"He answered, 'Then I beg you, father, send Lazarus to my family, for I have five brothers. Let him warn them, so that they will not also come to this place of torment.' "Abraham replied, 'They have Moses and the Prophets; let them listen to them.' "'No, father Abraham,' he said, 'but if someone from the dead goes to them, they will repent.' "He said to him, 'If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.'"* (Luke 16:27-31) Jesus told this parable to both warn His listeners that they should live a life dependent on God, but also to warn them that some would not believe, even if one returned to them "from the dead"! He was going to do just that- return from the dead in triumph, but many still would not- and have not- received Him as Savior!

The Rich man and Lazarus

1 Samuel 27-29 April 19, 2014 Luke 17:1-19

In order to escape from the relentless pursuit of Saul, David decided to live for a while with the Philistines. He earned the trust of Achish, who reasoned that "the enemy of my enemy is my friend", and was allowed to live in Ziklag. There David conducted raids on the Amalekites, Geshurites and Gerzites, all enemies of Israel. David's destruction of the people he raised was complete: *"Whenever David attacked an area, he did not leave a man or woman alive, but took sheep and cattle, donkeys and camels, and clothes. Then he returned to Achish."* (1 Sam 27:9). And David lived in relative security and safety from Saul, because of the trust he had generated with his Philistine "hosts": "Achish trusted David and said to himself, *"He has become so obnoxious to his people, the Israelites, that he will be my servant for life."*(1 Sam. 27:12)

Samuel was dead, and Saul became troubled as he faced the Philistines still again. After Samuel's death Saul *"had expelled the mediums and spiritists from the land."* (1 Sa. 28:3) And "when Saul saw the Philistine army, he was afraid" (1 Sam 28:5). Saul in desperation "inquired of the Lord" but there was no answer, either "by dreams or Urim or prophets." (1 Sam. 28:6b). So Saul then searched for a "medium"- one who could call up spirits from the dead- specifically Saul wished to speak with Samuel. Even though Saul himself had banned such persons, he sought them out of his own desperation and fear. The story unfolds, as Saul disguises himself to seek out the spirit of Samuel: *Saul then said to his attendants, "Find me a woman who is a medium, so I may go and inquire of her." "There is one in Endor," they said. So Saul disguised himself, putting on other clothes, and at night he and two men went to the woman. "Consult a spirit for me," he said, "and bring up for me the one I name." But the woman said to him, "Surely you know what Saul has done. He has cut off the mediums and spiritists from the land. Why have you set a trap for my life to bring about my death?" Saul swore to her by the Lord, "As surely as the Lord lives, you will not be punished for this." Then the woman asked, "Whom shall I bring up for you?" "Bring up Samuel," he said. When the woman saw Samuel, she cried out at the top of her voice and said to Saul, "Why have you deceived me? You are Saul!"* (1 Sam 28:7-12) Samuel was certainly not pleased at

being “summoned”, and had only the grimmest of news for Saul and his kingdom: *Samuel said to Saul, “Why have you disturbed me by bringing me up?” “I am in great distress,” Saul said. “The Philistines are fighting against me, and God has departed from me. He no longer answers me, either by prophets or by dreams. So I have called on you to tell me what to do.” Samuel said, “Why do you consult me, now that the Lord has departed from you and become your enemy? The Lord has done what he predicted through me. The Lord has torn the kingdom out of your hands and given it to one of your neighbors—to David. Because you did not obey the Lord or carry out his fierce wrath against the Amalekites, the Lord has done this to you today. The Lord will deliver both Israel and you into the hands of the Philistines, and tomorrow you and your sons will be with me. The Lord will also give the army of Israel into the hands of the Philistines.”* (1 Sam. 28:15b-19) So the greatest fear of Saul- that he would lose his position as king- and to David- were soon to be realized. Saul had been fasting before he sought the advice of the “spiritist” (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Spiritism), and his strength was nearly gone. Hardly the way to prepare for a major battle! The woman then prepared food and urged Saul to eat: *Immediately Saul fell full length on the ground, filled with fear because of Samuel’s words. His strength was gone, for he had eaten nothing all that day and all that night. When the woman came to Saul and saw that he was greatly shaken, she said, “Look, your servant has obeyed you. I took my life in my hands and did what you told me to do. Now please listen to your servant and let me give you some food so you may eat and have the strength to go on your way.” He refused and said, “I will not eat.” But his men joined the woman in urging him, and he listened to them. He got up from the ground and sat on the couch. The woman had a fattened calf at the house, which she butchered at once. She took some flour, kneaded it and baked bread without yeast. Then she set it before Saul and his men, and they ate. That same night they got up and left.* (1 Sam. 29:20-15)

The battle was brewing- the Philistines were gathering at Aphek, and the forces of Israel at Jezreel (1 Sam. 29:1). The Philistines noted that David, a Hebrew, and his men were marching and preparing for battle in the rear with Achish: *“As the Philistine rulers marched with their units of hundreds and thousands, David and his men were marching at the rear with Achish. 3 The commanders of the Philistines asked, “What about these Hebrews?” Achish replied, “Is this not David, who was an officer of Saul king of Israel? He has already been with me for over a year, and from the day he left Saul until now, I have found no fault in him.”* (1 Sam. 29:2-3). Achish was apparently satisfied with David’s loyalty. He heard the objections of his commanders as to David’s presence- they feared that David would turn on them during the battle: *“He must not go with us into battle, or he will turn against us during the fighting. How better could he regain his master’s favor than by taking the heads of our own men? Isn’t this the David they sang about in their dances:*
“‘Saul has slain his thousands,
and David his tens of thousands’?” (1 Sam. 29:4b-5).

So Achish told David: *“I know that you have been as pleasing in my eyes as an angel of God; nevertheless, the Philistine commanders have said, ‘He must not go up with us into battle.’ Now get up early, along with your master’s servants who have come with you, and leave in the morning as soon as it is light.” So David and his men got up early in the morning to go back to the land of the Philistines, and the Philistines went up to Jezreel.”* (1 Sam. 29:9b-11).

Saul and the Witch of Endor

Luke 17:1-19

Jesus took- and takes- the role of servanthood very seriously! We must also, He teaches, try to be aware of our actions and attitudes that they might cause one with weaker faith or less experience to "stumble". We must never assume that our freedom in Christ is a license to cause trouble or doubt among those with different experiences than ours. In the early church, the followers of Jesus faced such issues on a regular basis, including attitudes about coming to faith through Judaism first, or eating meat sacrificed to idols (1 Cor. 8) Jesus cautions us that we should never be the originator of such acts or attitudes: *"Things that cause people to stumble are bound to come, but woe to anyone through whom they come. It would be better for them to be thrown into the sea with a millstone tied around their neck than to cause one of these little ones to stumble. So watch yourselves."* (Luke 17:1b-3)

Similarly, we must be a "forgiving" people, even when forgiveness is demanded of us over and over. Jesus taught: *"If your brother or sister[a] sins against you, rebuke*

them; and if they repent, forgive them. Even if they sin against you seven times in a day and seven times come back to you saying 'I repent,' you must forgive them." (Luke 17:3b-4) How much faith do we need…? Jesus said the we must constantly increase our faith, but even a small but true fauith can accomplish wonders: *"If you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mulberry tree, 'Be uprooted and planted in the sea,' and it will obey you."* (Luke 17:6b).
We also need to be aware of how God sees us- as loving and faithful servants- or as "potential" loving servants who have not yet found our way. Jesus taught the disciples that we are expected to fulfill the role of servant- this is our true calling in the Kingdom: *"Suppose one of you has a servant plowing or looking after the sheep. Will he say to the servant when he comes in from the field, 'Come along now and sit down to eat'? Won't he rather say, 'Prepare my supper, get yourself ready and wait on me while I eat and drink; after that you may eat and drink'?Will he thank the servant because he did what he was told to do? So you also, when you have done everything you were told to do, should say, 'We are unworthy servants; we have only done our duty.'"* (Luke 17:7-10) So the clear implication here is that we must not only be servants- but more than servants!

Jesus then had an opportunity to heal and cleanse ten men afflicted with the frighteningly disfiguring disease of leprosy*. "As he was going into a village, ten men who had leprosy[b] met him. They stood at a distance and called out in a loud voice, "Jesus, Master, have pity on us!" When he saw them, he said, "Go, show yourselves to the priests." And as they went, they were cleansed."* (Luke 17:12-14). Notice that the lepers called to Jesus "from a distance", as lepers were required to stay away from all those who were "clean". And, disappointingly, only one returned to thank Jesus for this miracle of healing- a Samaritan! Jesus was again making the point by this example that God loved the Samaritans despite the rejection of Samaritans by "good Jews". Jesus asked an important and revealing question: *"Jesus asked, "Were not all ten cleansed? Where are the other nine? Has no one returned to give praise to God except this foreigner?" 19 Then he said to him, "Rise and go; your faith has made you well."* (Luke 17:17-19)

1 Samuel 30-31 April 20, 2014 Luke 17:20-37

David and his men had been sent back to Ziklag. Instead of receiving comfort at their return to their "new home" among the Philistines, they discovered that the city had been torched and their wives and children taken hostage. The weeping was intense, the men even thought of stoning David because of this horrible event. (1 Sam. 30:1-6). But David found "strength in the Lord" (1 Sam: 30:6b). So David got the ephod and inquired of the Lord if he and his men should try to overtake the Amalekites and reclaim their families. He was told by God: *"Pursue them," he answered. "You will certainly overtake them and succeed in the rescue."* (1 Sam. 30:8b). David took six hundred men with him and started his pursuit across the Besor Valley, where two hundred of them could go no further due to exhaustion. So David set out with the four hundred remaining. (1 Sam. 30:10). Then their pursuit took a favorable turn- they found an Egyptian*: "in a field and brought him to David. They gave him water to drink and food to eat— part of a cake of pressed figs and two cakes of raisins. He ate and was revived, for he had not eaten any food or drunk any water for three days and three nights."* (1 Sam. 30:11b-12). The Egyptian told them he was a slave of the Amalekites, and that they had burned the town of Ziklag

and carried off the women and children. (1 Sam. 30: 13-14). The Egyptian made them promise not to kill him, and he agreed to take them to the women and children that the Amalekites had carried off.

He led them to the place, and the Amalekites were celebrating, drinking and reveling, and completely off guard- probably figuring they would not be pursued or discovered: *"He led David down, and there they were, scattered over the countryside, eating, drinking and reveling because of the great amount of plunder they had taken from the land of the Philistines and from Judah. David fought them from dusk until the evening of the next day, and none of them got away, except four hundred young men who rode off on camels and fled. David recovered everything the Amalekites had taken, including his two wives. Nothing was missing: young or old, boy or girl, plunder or anything else they had taken. David brought everything back. He took all the flocks and herds, and his men drove them ahead of the other livestock, saying, "This is David's plunder."* (1 Sam. 30:16-20).

The men returned to Ziklag, and found the two hundred they had left behind at the Besor Valley. The four hundred who had raided and beaten the Amalekites didn't want to share the livestock with those left behind, only to return their wives and children to them. But David wisely overruled this notion saying: *"No, my brothers, you must not do that with what the Lord has given us. He has protected us and delivered into our hands the raiding party that came against us. Who will listen to what you say? The share of the man who stayed with the supplies is to be the same as that of him who went down to the battle. All will share alike."* (1 Sam. 30:23b-24). David also shared the plunder with the "elders of Judah", more than likely gaining their favor and cementing their loyalty to him as leader: *"When David reached Ziklag, he sent some of the plunder to the elders of Judah, who were his friends, saying, "Here is a gift for you from the plunder of the Lord's enemies."* (1 Sam. 30:26).

Saul, along with three of his sons, met their tragic end at the hands of the Philistines. Saul probably knew his time as king was coming to a close, but my guess is he did not expect his journey on earth to end as abruptly as it did. How many times have I assumed that I had "lots of time" left on the earth..? But the clock is always ticking, and we- blessedly- do not know the hour and the day when we will leave this earth. Saul had fought the Philistines before, but he had in the past enjoyed the favor and blessing of God which led to victory. This time was to be different. The Israeli army was fleeing the Philistines at Mount Gilboa, and Saul's sons were killed in the conflict, and Saul was surrounded: *"The Philistines were in hot pursuit of Saul and his sons, and they killed his sons Jonathan, Abinadab and Malki-Shua. The fighting grew fierce around Saul, and when the archers overtook him, they wounded him critically." (1 Sam. 31:2-3) Not wanting to die at the hands of his enemies, Saul demanded that his armor bearer kill him: Saul said to his armor-bearer, "Draw your sword and run me through, or these uncircumcised fellows will come and run me through and abuse me." (1 Sam. 31:4b).* But the armor bearer was too terrified to kill Saul, so Saul fell on his own sword, as did the armor bearer. *(1 Sam 31:4b-6)* Having lost the fight, the Israeli army abandoned the villages along the valley: *When the Israelites along the valley and those across the Jordan saw that the Israelite army had fled and that Saul and*

his sons had died, they abandoned their towns and fled. And the Philistines came and occupied them. (1 Sam. 31:7).

Then the Philistines, when returning to the field of battle to strip the dead, discovered Saul and his three sons at Mount Gilboa. They beheaded Saul's body, and took the body and his armor to their pagan temple. The people of Jabesh Gilead heard about this, and took the bodies of Saul and his sons from the Philistines, and burned and buried the bodies and then mourned and fasted: *When the people of Jabesh Gilead heard what the Philistines had done to Saul, all their valiant men marched through the night to Beth Shan. They took down the bodies of Saul and his sons from the wall of Beth Shan and went to Jabesh, where they burned them. Then they took their bones and buried them under a tamarisk tree at Jabesh, and they fasted seven days.* (1 Sam. 31:11-13)

Saul falls on His Sword F.B. Schell

Luke 17:20-37

The Kingdom of God- a subject Jesus taught and preached on so many times- and yet how little most of us understand about it. The situation was not very different among Jesus' followers, so He taught them often about it: Once, on being asked by the Pharisees when the kingdom of God would come, Jesus replied, "The coming of the kingdom of God is not something that can be observed, 21 nor will people say, 'Here it is,' or 'There it is,' because the kingdom of God is in your midst." (Luke 17:20b-21). Jesus warned that their would be many "flase alrms" as people looked for "one of the days of the Son of Man" (Luke 17:22). "People will tell you, 'There he is!' or 'Here he is!' Do not go running off after them. 24 For the Son of Man in his day[d] will be like the lightning, which flashes and lights up the sky from one end to the other. 25 But first he must suffer many things and be rejected by this generation." (Luke 17:23b-25). So many have claimed to be "the Messiah" or have had their followers make their claim- all false. The list of those making this claim in history is long- please see a list at: (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_messiah_claimants) None of these was the Messiah- for he has already come, and is coming again (but not as one of these!).

Jesus paints a vivid picture of the unexpectedness and surprise that will characterize His coming: *"Just as it was in the days of Noah, so also will it be in the days of the Son of Man. 27 People were eating, drinking, marrying and being given in marriage up to the day Noah entered the ark. Then the flood came and destroyed them all. 28 "It was the same in the days of Lot. People were eating and drinking, buying and selling, planting and building. 29 But the day Lot left Sodom, fire and sulfur rained down from heaven and destroyed them all. 30 "It will be just like this on the day the Son of Man is revealed. 31 On that day no one who is on the housetop, with possessions inside, should go down to get them. Likewise, no one in the field should go back for anything. 32 Remember Lot's wife! 33 Whoever tries to keep their life will lose it, and whoever loses their life will preserve it. 34 I tell you, on that night two people will be in one bed; one will be taken and the other left. 35 Two women will be grinding grain together; one will be taken and the other left."* (Luke 17:26-35). Note that everything will be going along "as usual", especially for those who ignore or dismiss Jesus' claims of His coming (2 Peter 3:1-13).

Once again, the disciples want to know more: "Where, Lord?" they asked. He replied, "Where there is a dead body, there the vultures will gather." (Luke 17:37). Where indeed? Jesus seems to be telling His followers- look at the signs- and follow them. But we should always be wary of those who claim to have "deciphered the code" of the day and time of His coming, and be especially wary of those who claim to be Him- Reverend Moon, the Dalai Lama, and so many others (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_people_claimed_to_be_Jesus).

2 Samuel 1-3 April 21, 2014 Luke 18:1-17

Bad news always seems to travel fast. Even in a day where messages were sent by letter, or on foot by messenger, the news of the death of Israel's king came quickly to David and his men. *"After the death of Saul, David returned from striking down the Amalekites and stayed in Ziklag two days. On the third day a man arrived from Saul's camp with his clothes torn and dust on his head. When he came to David, he fell to the ground to pay him honor. "Where have you come from?" David asked*

him. He answered, "I have escaped from the Israelite camp." "What happened?" David asked. "Tell me." "The men fled from the battle," he replied. "Many of them fell and died. And Saul and his son Jonathan are dead." (2 Sam. 1:1-4). The young man who made this report had unsuspectingly sealed his own doom. Instead of the rejoicing he expected from David at the death of his "enemy", the reaction was just the opposite- outrage and mourning.

David asked: *"How do you know that Saul and his son Jonathan are dead?"* He answered: *"I happened to be on Mount Gilboa," the young man said, "and there was Saul, leaning on his spear, with the chariots and their drivers in hot pursuit. When he turned around and saw me, he called out to me, and I said, 'What can I do?' "He asked me, 'Who are you?' "'An Amalekite,' I answered. "Then he said to me, 'Stand here by me and kill me! I'm in the throes of death, but I'm still alive.' "So I stood beside him and killed him, because I knew that after he had fallen he could not survive. And I took the crown that was on his head and the band on his arm and have brought them here to my lord."* (2 Sam. 1:6-10) David tore his clothes, wept and fasted until evening. Then he asked the young man another question: *"Why weren't you afraid to lift your hand to destroy the Lord's anointed?"* Then David had one of his men strike down and kill the messenger. David said to the unfortunate messenger: "*Your blood be on your own head. Your own mouth testified against you when you said, 'I killed the Lord's anointed.'"* (2 Sam. 1: 14-16).

David then lamented for Saul and Jonathan. His lament is recorded in the form of a beautiful poem:

"A gazelle lies slain on your heights, Israel.
How the mighty have fallen!
"Tell it not in Gath,
proclaim it not in the streets of Ashkelon,
lest the daughters of the Philistines be glad,
lest the daughters of the uncircumcised rejoice.
"Mountains of Gilboa,
may you have neither dew nor rain,
may no showers fall on your terraced fields.[b]
For there the shield of the mighty was despised,
the shield of Saul—no longer rubbed with oil.
"From the blood of the slain,
from the flesh of the mighty,
the bow of Jonathan did not turn back,
the sword of Saul did not return unsatisfied.
Saul and Jonathan—
in life they were loved and admired,
and in death they were not parted.
They were swifter than eagles,
they were stronger than lions.
"Daughters of Israel,
weep for Saul,

who clothed you in scarlet and finery,
who adorned your garments with ornaments of gold.
“How the mighty have fallen in battle!
Jonathan lies slain on your heights.
I grieve for you, Jonathan my brother;
you were very dear to me.
Your love for me was wonderful,
more wonderful than that of women.
“How the mighty have fallen!
The weapons of war have perished!” (2 Sam. 1:19-27)

Now it was time for David to assume his position as the anointed king of Israel!. He first inquired of the Lord, and was led to Hebron, where David was anointed king of Judah: In the course of time, David inquired of the Lord. *“Shall I go up to one of the towns of Judah?” he asked. The Lord said, “Go up.” David asked, “Where shall I go?” “To Hebron,” the Lord answered. So David went up there with his two wives, Ahinoam of Jezreel and Abigail, the widow of Nabal of Carmel. David also took the men who were with him, each with his family, and they settled in Hebron and its towns. Then the men of Judah came to Hebron, and there they anointed David king over the tribe of Judah. (1 Sam. 2:1-4).* David thanked the brave people of Jabesh Gilead who had rescued Saul’s body from the Philistines and buried him at Hebron. Unfortunately for David, Saul’s commander Abner, and Saul’s son Ish-Bosheth, were still desirious of ruling over what had been Saul’s kingdom. *“So they ruled over most of Israel- except Judah, for years and hostilities broke out between the camps of David and Saul: Meanwhile, Abner son of Ner, the commander of Saul’s army, had taken Ish-Bosheth son of Saul and brought him over to Mahanaim. He made him king over Gilead, Ashuri and Jezreel, and also over Ephraim, Benjamin and all Israel. Ish-Bosheth son of Saul was forty years old when he became king over Israel, and he reigned two years. The tribe of Judah, however, remained loyal to David. The length of time David was king in Hebron over Judah was seven years and six months. Abner son of Ner, together with the men of Ish-Bosheth son of Saul, left Mahanaim and went to Gibeon. Joab son of Zeruiah and David’s men went out and met them at the pool of Gibeon. One group sat down on one side of the pool and one group on the other side. Then Abner said to Joab, “Let’s have some of the young men get up and fight hand to hand in front of us.” “All right, let them do it,” Joab said. So they stood up and were counted off—twelve men for Benjamin and Ish-Bosheth son of Saul, and twelve for David. Then each man grabbed his opponent by the head and thrust his dagger into his opponent’s side, and they fell down together. So that place in Gibeon was called Helkath Hazzurim. (“Helkath Hazzurin” means “field of daggers or field of hostilities.”) The battle that day was very fierce, and Abner and the Israelites were defeated by David’s men.* (2 Sam. 2:8-17). Ashahel then decided to chase Abner, with disastrous results! *“Asahel refused to give up the pursuit; so Abner thrust the butt of his spear into Asahel’s stomach, and the spear came out through his back. He fell there and died on the spot. And every man stopped when he came to the place where Asahel had fallen and died. But Joab and Abishai pursued Abner, and as the sun was setting, they came to the hill of Ammah, near Giah on the way to the wasteland of Gibeon. Then the men of Benjamin rallied behind Abner. They formed themselves into a group and took their stand on top of a hill. Abner called out to Joab, “Must the sword devour forever?*

Don't you realize that this will end in bitterness? How long before you order your men to stop pursuing their fellow Israelites?" Joab answered, "As surely as God lives, if you had not spoken, the men would have continued pursuing them until morning." So Joab blew the trumpet, and all the troops came to a halt; they no longer pursued Israel, nor did they fight anymore. (2 Sam. 2:23-28)

As time continued: *"The war between the house of Saul and the house of David lasted a long time. David grew stronger and stronger, while the house of Saul grew weaker and weaker."* (2 Sam. 3:1) And David's family increased while he was in Hebron- he had six sons born! Later, Abner, who had commanded Saul's army, decided to side with David, partly over a conflict with Ish-Bosheth, but mostly out of his growing sense of loyalty to David and his realization that David was, after all, the "Lord's anointed". He wanted to solidify the kingdom of Israel, and had wonderful intentions for peace and unity. The Scripture tells us: "*Then he went to Hebron to tell David everything that Israel and the whole tribe of Benjamin wanted to do. When Abner, who had twenty men with him, came to David at Hebron, David prepared a feast for him and his men. Then Abner said to David, "Let me go at once and assemble all Israel for my lord the king, so that they may make a covenant with you, and that you may rule over all that your heart desires." So David sent Abner away, and he went in peace.* (2 Sam. 3:19b-21). All was not well, though, as Joab returned and accused Abner of spying on David. He also had a score to settle over Abner's killing of his brother Asahel: *"Joab then left David and sent messengers after Abner, and they brought him back from the cistern at Sirah. But David did not know it. Now when Abner returned to Hebron, Joab took him aside into an inner chamber, as if to speak with him privately. And there, to avenge the blood of his brother Asahel, Joab stabbed him in the stomach, and he died."* (2 Sam. 3:26-27).

Once again, David was in mourning, this time for Abner. It was important that the people knew David had nothing to do with Abner's death: *Then David said to Joab and all the people with him, "Tear your clothes and put on sackcloth and walk in mourning in front of Abner." King David himself walked behind the bier. They buried Abner in Hebron, and the king wept aloud at Abner's tomb. All the people wept also.*

The king sang this lament for Abner:

"Should Abner have died as the lawless die?
Your hands were not bound,
your feet were not fettered.
You fell as one falls before the wicked."
And all the people wept over him again.

Luke 18:1-17

A judge who didn't care what people though and didn't "fear God"..? Who would believe such a thing? Such was the opposition a woman faced when she made her constant plea: *'Grant me justice against my adversary.'* (Luke 18:3). So to avoid what the judge thought might lead to an "attack" from the persistent woman, he

granted her wish: *"For some time he refused. But finally he said to himself, 'Even though I don't fear God or care what people think, yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will see that she gets justice, so that she won't eventually come and attack me!'"* (Luke 18:4-5). The widow, as we may remember, had little real power in the nearly exclusively patriarchal society. And yet she got justice from an unjust man by sheer persistence! Jesus uses this as a teaching point when He says*: "Listen to what the unjust judge says. And will not God bring about justice for his chosen ones, who cry out to him day and night? Will he keep putting them off? I tell you, he will see that they get justice, and quickly. However, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on the earth?"* (Luke 18:6b-8). Notice that Jesus is very realistic- even though God will provide justice for His people, they may still not be "faithful"- how quickly we forget God's graciousness and turn back to "our own way"!

The issue of self-righteousness was very important then and now. In Jesus' world, the "experts in the Law" and others of similar function and standing often "paraded" their "righteousness" before others: To some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everyone else, Jesus told this parable: "*Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood by himself and prayed: 'God, I thank you that I am not like other people—robbers, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector. 12 I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.'* (Luke 18:10-12). But the tax collected was humble and realistic, and could not even raise his eyes to God: "But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, *'God, have mercy on me, a sinner.'* (Luke 18:13). Jesus taught His disciples that the tax collector, not the Pharisee, was "justified" in the eyes of God, for: *"all those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted."* (Luke 18:14b).

Then Jesus gave His followers a reminder about the accessibility of the Kingdom to everyone- even those who we don't recognize as "powerful" or "important". Children in that day were not any more influential or significant to those outside their own family than they are today, but Jesus assured us that God cares for them and welcomes them into His fellowship: *"Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these. Truly I tell you, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it."* (Luke 18:16b-17). Many have misunderstood these words. God doesn't require us to be "innocent" or "naïve" or to have a "simple" approach to enter Heaven- he is instead commending their simple TRUST in Him- a trust that we must also have in our loving Father God!

2 Samuel 4-6 April 22, 2014 Luke 18:18-43

Remember Ish-Bosheth? He was one of the surviving heirs of Saul. He heard about the death of Abner, Saul's general, and was troubled. Would those seeking out Abner seek him out also? Unfortunately, Ish-Bosheth's fears were well grounded. The Scripture tells us that: *"Rekab and Baanah, the sons of Rimmon the Beerothite, set out for the house of Ish-Bosheth, and they arrived there in the heat of the day while he was taking his noonday rest. They went into the inner part of the house as if to get some wheat, and they stabbed him in the stomach. Then Rekab and his brother Baanah slipped away. They had gone into the house while he was lying on the bed in his bedroom. After they stabbed and killed him, they cut off his head. Taking it with them, they traveled all night by way of the Arabah. They brought the head of Ish-Bosheth to David at Hebron and said to the king, "Here is the head of Ish-Bosheth son of Saul, your enemy, who tried to kill you. This day the Lord has avenged my lord the king against Saul and his offspring."* (2 Samuel 4:5b-8) Certainly these two murderere expected praise from David, but his reaction was swift and decisive: *"As surely as the Lord lives, who has delivered me out of every trouble, when someone told me, 'Saul is dead,' and thought he was bringing good news, I seized him and put him to death in Ziklag. That was the reward I gave him for his news! How much more—when wicked men have killed an innocent man in his own house and on his own bed—should I not now demand his blood from your hand and rid the earth of you!"* (2 Sam. 4:9b-11) And David gave the order to his men to have them killed.

David was then crowned king of Israel. The elders of all the tribes came together at Hebron, and made a covenant that David should rule over them. *"David was thirty years old when he became king, and he reigned forty years. In Hebron he reigned*

over Judah seven years and six months, and in Jerusalem he reigned over all Israel and Judah thirty-three years." (2 Sam. 5:4b-5) Much had transpired since he was anointed by Samuel, and there was certainly much yet to come for this man "after God's own heart" (1 Sam. 13:14)

Now the time had come to capture Jerusalem, the home of the Jebusites. The inhabitants of Jerusalem did not believe David could conquer them, partly because Jereusalem was a walled and fortified city*. "The Jebusites said to David, "You will not get in here; even the blind and the lame can ward you off." They thought, "David cannot get in here." Nevertheless, David captured the fortress of Zion—which is the City of David."* (2 Sam. 5:6b-7). The reason that David was successful- not military might- though he had that; not clever strategy, although that was used- it was because "the Lord God Almighty was with him" (2 Sa. 5:10). David's rule was recognized favorabley by the nations around Israel, notably Hiram king of Tyre, who sent cedar logs to David to build a temple: *"Now Hiram king of Tyre sent envoys to David, along with cedar logs and carpenters and stonemasons, and they built a palace for David. Then David knew that the Lord had established him as king over Israel and had exalted his kingdom for the sake of his people Israel."* (2 Sam. 5:11-12) The David defeated the Philistines, at one point by attacking them at Baal Perazim, and at another time following that at the Valley of Rephaim. In both cases David "inquired of the Lord" before going into battle (2 Sam. 5:19 and 23). The Scripture tells us: "So David did as the Lord commanded him, and he struck down the Philistines all the way from Gibeon to Gezer." (2 Sam. 5:25). We should not be surprised that following God's commands leads to success!

As a final step in consolidating his spiritual authority, David sough to move the ark of the covenant from Judah to Jerusalem. It was a cause for celebration! *"David again brought together all the able young men of Israel—thirty thousand. He and all his men went to Baalah in Judah to bring up from there the ark of God, which is called by the Name, the name of the Lord Almighty, who is enthroned between the cherubim on the ark. They set the ark of God on a new cart and brought it from the house of Abinadab, which was on the hill. Uzzah and Ahio, sons of Abinadab, were guiding the new cart with the ark of God on it, and Ahio was walking in front of it. David and all Israel were celebrating with all their might before the Lord, with castanets, harps, lyres, timbrels, sistrums and cymbals."* (2 Sam. 6:1-5) Note that they were careful to put the ark on a "new cart". There was trouble, however, because of an accidental stumble of one of the oxen: "When they came to the threshing floor of Nakon, Uzzah reached out and took hold of the ark of God, because the oxen stumbled. 7 The Lord's anger burned against Uzzah because of his irreverent act; therefore God struck him down, and he died there beside the ark of God." (2 Sam. 6:6-7). IT seems extreme to us that God would punish a person for tring to prevent the ark from falling to the ground. God, however, apparently used this incident to underline the critical importance of reverence in handling the ark!

David then was angry with God over this seemingly senseless death, and instead of bringing the ark to Jerusalem left it in the care of Obed-Edom the Gittite. God blessed Obed's family for their care of the ark. The God showed David the solution to his quandary*: "The LORD has blessed the household of Obed-Edom and everything he has, because of the ark of God." So David went to bring up the ark of*

God from the house of Obed-Edom to the City of David with rejoicing. When those who were carrying the ark of the LORD had taken six steps, he sacrificed a bull and a fattened calf. Wearing a linen ephod, David was dancing before the LORD with all his might, while he and all Israel were bringing up the ark of the LORD with shouts and the sound of trumpets. (2 Sam. 6:12b-15) When Michal, Saul's daughter and David's first wife, saw David dancing she was embarrassed and rebuked him: *"As the ark of the Lord was entering the City of David, Michal daughter of Saul watched from a window. And when she saw King David leaping and dancing before the Lord, she despised him in her heart."* (2 Sam. 6:16) When David returned home to bless his household, Michal daughter of Saul came out to meet him and said, *"How the king of Israel has distinguished himself today, going around half-naked in full view of the slave girls of his servants as any vulgar fellow would!"* (2 Sam. 6:20) David replied simply that God had given him, not Saul, the kingdom- and that furthermore he was celebrating- worshipping- before God and that the slave girls she referred to so contemptuously would hold him "in honor". It is no surprise that one person's worship style is held in contempt bu others, who insist on "propriety" and "solemnness" before God. But God sees the heart, and knows when we are truly in worship with and of Him. God's response to Michal's criticism was to render he childless: *"And Michal daughter of Saul had no children to the day of her death."* (2 Sam. 6:23)

The Joy of The Redeemed (King David Dancing) 2 John The Baptist Artworks

Luke 18:18-43

A certain "ruler" asked Jesus about what he must do to inherit eternal life. Mark's gospel tells us he is "rich" (Mark 10:22b "he was one who owned much property"); Matthew's gospel that he was "young" (Matthew 16:20 "The young man said to Him, "All these things I have kept from my youth. What do I still lack?"), and Luke tells us that he was a "ruler" (Luke 18:18 " A certain ruler asked him, "Good

teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?") It seems clear from the context of these three accounts that they are all referring to the same incident. Jesus' answer shows that He knew the heart of the young man, and that He saw the single thing that kept this young person from the Kingdom- his love of money! Jesus tells the man that this is the "one thing" he lacks, but this "one thing" is actually everything! Overcome this, and your heart will be focused entirely on God: *"You still lack one thing. Sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me." (*Luke 18:22b). Notice the sequence- we must first give up that which hinders us, and then we are truly free to follow Jesus. When the young man heard this, he was "sad"- sad because he now knew the cost of following the Lord- absolute devotion with nothing held back: *"When he heard this, he became very sad, because he was very wealthy. Jesus looked at him and said, "How hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God! Indeed, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God."* (Luke 18:23-25).

The disciples then ask an important question: *"Who then can be saved?"* (Luke 18:26b). Indeed, who can? Jesus' answer tells us an important truth- we can't do it ourselves…only God can save us: *"What is impossible with man is possible with God."* (Luke 18:27b). Then the disciples protest that "We have left all we had to follow you!" (Luke 18:28b). Jesus reassures them that their sacrifice will be rewarded- *"Truly I tell you," Jesus said to them, "no one who has left home or wife or brothers or sisters or parents or children for the sake of the kingdom of God will fail to receive many times as much in this age, and in the age to come eternal life."* (Luke 18:29-30)

Once again, Jesus predicts His death. He did this several times, most likely so that they would remember later. It was clear that they did not truly understand this, since they already had the "script" in their minds that the Messiah would be an earthly king and re-establish Israel to its former glory. The Scripture tells us that the truth of Jesus' teaching was: *"hidden from them, and they did not know what he was talking about."* (Luke 18:34b).

Jesus then performs another miracle- the restoration of sight to a "blind beggar". IT has always been amazing to me to think of what the beggar must have missed- here was the very Lord of All standing before him and asking: *"What do you want me to do for you?"* (Luke 18:41). And Jesus healed him and told him that: *"your faith has healed you."* (Luke 18:42). And the man and the people "praised God" (Luke 18:43)- the very reason that this and many miracles were performed- for the Glory of God!

2 Samuel 7-9 April 23, 2014 Luke 19:1-28

Now David was fully in command of the combined kingdom. God blessed him in every way, giving him the favor of the people and victory over his enemies. In gratitude, David decided that he should build a proper dwelling for the ark, a permanent replacement for the Tent of Meeting: *After the king was settled in his palace and the Lord had given him rest from all his enemies around him, he said to Nathan the prophet, "Here I am, living in a house of cedar, while the ark of God*

remains in a tent." Nathan replied to the king, "Whatever you have in mind, go ahead and do it, for the Lord is with you." (2 Sam. 7:1-3)

God gave the prophet Nathan a dream , in which He addressed David's desire to build a temple. First of all, God told Nathan that He had never asked for a permanent dwelling: *"did I ever say to any of their rulers whom I commanded to shepherd my people Israel, "Why have you not built me a house of cedar?"'*(2 Sam. 7:7b). Secondly, God promised peace: *I will also give you rest from all your enemies.* (2 Sam. 7:11b). Lastly and most importantly, one of David's successors would build the temple, and the throne of his kingdom would be established forever*: I will raise up your offspring to succeed you, your own flesh and blood, and I will establish his kingdom. He is the one who will build a house for my Name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever.* (2 Sam. 7:12b-13). There is OUR plan, which is always imperfect, and then there is GOD's plan, which is always perfect! Nathan then faithfully conveyed this dream to David: *Nathan reported to David all the words of this entire revelation.* (2 Sam. 7:17).

What was David's reaction? Outrage that God had not agreed with him? Insistence on his own way? No, for David had a heart for God. His reaction was a prayer of thanksgiving. *"Who am I, Sovereign Lord, and what is my family, that you have brought me this far? And as if this were not enough in your sight, Sovereign Lord, you have also spoken about the future of the house of your servant—and this decree, Sovereign Lord, is for a mere human!"* (2 Sam. 7:18b-19) And David praised the Name of God: *"Sovereign Lord, you are God! Your covenant is trustworthy, and you have promised these good things to your servant. Now be pleased to bless the house of your servant, that it may continue forever in your sight; for you, Sovereign Lord, have spoken, and with your blessing the house of your servant will be blessed forever."* (2 Sam 7:28-29)

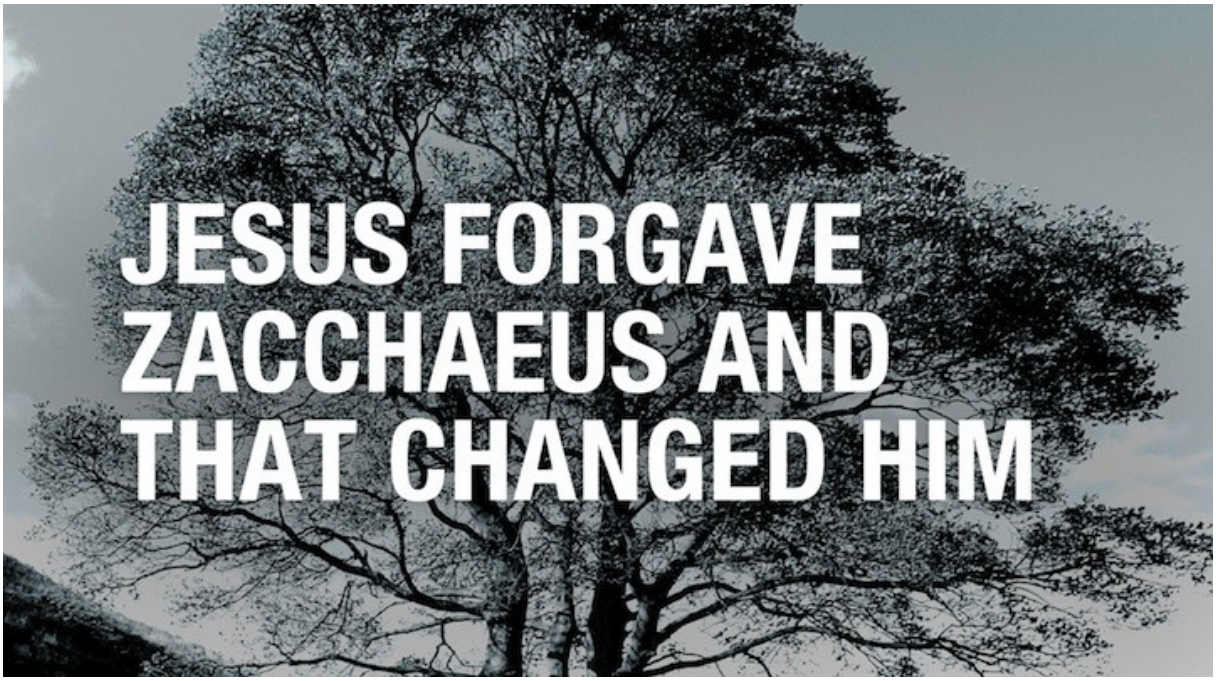
David's victories continued, as evidence of his favor with the Lord. He defeated the Philistines, long a thorn in the side of Israel. He overcame the Moabites: *"He made them lie down on the ground and measured them off with a length of cord. Every two lengths of them were put to death, and the third length was allowed to live. So the Moabites became subject to David and brought him tribute."* (2 Sam. 8:2b). He defeated the army of Hadadezar and the Arameans of Damascus (2 Sam. 8: 3-7). He dedicated the precious metals and bronze taken from his enemies to the Lord-materials later used in constructing the Temple (2 Sam. 8: 7-12). He was able to take from his enemies, and hold his gains with garrisons: *He put garrisons throughout Edom, and all the Edomites became subject to David. The Lord gave David victory wherever he went.* (2 Sam. 8:14). To administer and manage the kingdom, Davis appointed officials and priests: *David reigned over all Israel, doing what was just and right for all his people. Joab son of Zeruiah was over the army; Jehoshaphat son of Ahilud was recorder; Zadok son of Ahitub and Ahimelek son of Abiathar were priests; Seraiah was secretary; Benaiah son of Jehoiada was over the Kerethites and Pelethites; and David's sons were priests*. (2 Sam. 8:15-18).

David then wished to show kindness to Saul's family, perhaps as a tribute to God and a remembrance to his dear and close friend Jonathan. He asked if there were any living relatives of Saul remaining: *"Is there anyone still left of the house of Saul*

to whom I can show kindness for Jonathan's sake?" (2 Sam. 9:1b). There was! Jonathan had a son who was lame in both feet, named Mephibosheth. David had him brought to Jerusalem: "*So King David had him brought from Lo Debar, from the house of Makir son of Ammiel. When Mephibosheth son of Jonathan, the son of Saul, came to David, he bowed down to pay him honor. David said, "Mephibosheth!" "At your service," he replied. "Don't be afraid," David said to him, "for I will surely show you kindness for the sake of your father Jonathan. I will restore to you all the land that belonged to your grandfather Saul, and you will always eat at my table."* (2 Sam. 9:5-7) And so David cared for Mephibosheth and restored to him and his servants *"everything that belonged to Saul and his family"* (2 Sam. 9:9).

Luke 19:1-28

Tax collectors- who would welcome them? This was especially true in Jesus' time, since many tax collectors took "extra" taxes for themselves. They also worked for the hated Roman government, and many considered them as the "lowest of the low". Yet Jesus saw in everyone the person God wants them to be, and the small statured Zacchaeus was no exception! Zacchaeus wanted desperately to see Jesus, and had to climb a tree to see over the crowd. There was Jesus…and Zacchaeus was addressed by the Lord*: "Zacchaeus, come down immediately. I must stay at your house today." So he came down at once and welcomed him gladly."* (Luke 19:5b-6). Not only did Jesus recognize him, but wanted to fellowship with him. Others could only see a sinner: *"He has gone to be the guest of a sinner."* (Luke 19:7b), but Jesus saw the person- the redeemed person, that Zacchaeus could become. And Jesus' confidence was rewarded immediately, as Zacchaeus declared: "*Look, Lord! Here and now I give half of my possessions to the poor, and if I have cheated anybody out of anything, I will pay back four times the amount."* (Luke 19:8b) Unlike the rich young ruler, Zacchaeus gladly and immediately gave away his "hindrance" and embraced Jesus. And God's kingdom gained another member, from the gentle and restoring touch of the Master. Jesus said to him: *"Today salvation has come to this house, because this man, too, is a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost."* (Luke 19:9b).



The parable of the “minas” or talents has been puzzling to many readers (and hearers) over the years. The simple and surface meaning of the story seems contradictory. We can certainly understand rewarding the one- or ones- who have been wise and invested their “talents” in a responsible and careful way. But what of the one who was afraid of his master? Was he to be condemned for his fear and worry that somehow he would lose even a small part of his master’s treasure. The fear seems reasonable, since the master is described as “hard” – *“I was afraid of you, because you are a hard man. You take out what you did not put in and reap what you did not sow.’* (Luke 19:21). This description was not disputed but repeated by the master himself. He then asks the servant why he didn’t even trust the banks: *“Why then didn’t you put my money on deposit, so that when I came back, I could have collected it with interest?*’ (Luke 19:23). Finally we can see the problem with the “fearful servant”. He didn’t trust his own common sense or instincts enough to take even a small step of faith. And this, it would seem, is the point Jesus is making. Sometimes we must trust God enough to be “extravagant” in our faith, and trust the One who is “rich in mercy” (Eph. 2:4). The tiny bit of “non-functional” faith that we had was not sufficient to cause us to trust, so that “faith” that we had is not sufficient to bring us to the kingdom. The words of Jesus seem harsh and final, but they are a realistic summation of the final state of those without faith: *“He replied, ‘I tell you that to everyone who has, more will be given, but as for the one who has nothing, even what they have will be taken away. But those enemies of mine who did not want me to be king over them—bring them here and kill them in front of me.’”* (Luke 19:26-27)

2 Sam 10-12 April 24, 2014 Luke 19:29-48

David tried to extend an “olive branch” to the Ammonites. The king had died, and David sent an envoy to Hanun, son of the late king Nahash, to offer condolences and sympathy (2 Sam. 10:1-2). But the Ammonites were suspicious of the Hebrews,

thinking they had been sent to spy, and humiliated them by cutting off their beards and exposing them by cutting off their garments at the buttocks (2 Sam. 10:3-4). David told the men who returned in a state of humiliation: *"Stay at Jericho till your beards have grown, and then come back."* (2 Sam. 10:5b). The Ammonites realized they had made a serious error in judgment, and prepared for the inevitable retaliation by David by conscripting: *"twenty thousand Aramean foot soldiers from Beth Rehob and Zobah, as well as the king of Maakah with a thousand men, and also twelve thousand men from Tob."* (2 Sam. 10:6b). So David, noting the reinforcements, took his whole army into battl;e against the Arameans and Ammonites: *"On hearing this, David sent Joab out with the entire army of fighting men. The Ammonites came out and drew up in battle formation at the entrance of their city gate, while the Arameans of Zobah and Rehob and the men of Tob and Maakah were by themselves in the open country."* (2 Sam. 10:7b-8). The forces were divided, and the plan was for one half of the army of Israel to attack the Ammonites, and the other the Arameans. If one force was too strong for God's army, the other was to come to their rescue. (2 Sam. 10:9-12). When Joab attacked the Arameans, they fled- and the Ammonites, seeing the defeat of the Arameans, fled also- pursued by Abishai. *"Then Joab and the troops with him advanced to fight the Arameans, and they fled before him. When the Ammonites realized that the Arameans were fleeing, they fled before Abishai and went inside the city. So Joab returned from fighting the Ammonites and came to Jerusalem."* (2 Sam. 10:13-14)

The Arameans then regrouped, and went to Shelam led by Hadadezar. But David was triumphant against them: *"After the Arameans saw that they had been routed by Israel, they regrouped. Hadadezer had Arameans brought from beyond the Euphrates River; they went to Helam, with Shobak the commander of Hadadezer's army leading them. When David was told of this, he gathered all Israel, crossed the Jordan and went to Helam. The Arameans formed their battle lines to meet David and fought against him. But they fled before Israel, and David killed seven hundred of their charioteers and forty thousand of their foot soldiers. He also struck down Shobak the commander of their army, and he died there. When all the kings who were vassals of Hadadezer saw that they had been routed by Israel, they made peace with the Israelites and became subject to them. So the Arameans were afraid to help the Ammonites anymore."* (2 Sam. 10:15b-19)

The David was ensnared in a terrible sin. He was neither at the right place or the right time. His army was in the field, and David should have been with them. Instead, he was at the royal palace, strolling the roof and looking at the city below. What should he see but a beautiful woman bathing. The woman was Bathsheba, the wife of one of David's men in the field, Uriah the Hittite. (2 Sam. 11:1-3). So David sent for her, and slept with her. One could hardly reject the king of Israel! The woman conceived and sent a message to David that she was pregnant (2 Sam. 11:4-5). So David tried several plans to extricate him from the consequences of his sin: First he sent for Uriah, and kept him out of battle for two days and nights. But Uriah was loyal to his men and refused to sleep at home with his wife, sleeping instead *"on his mat among his mater's servants"* (2 Sam. 11:13b) Having failed at this ploy, he then sent a letter to his general Joab, and told Joab: *"Put Uriah out in front where the fighting is fiercest. Then withdraw from him so he will be struck down and die."* (2 Sam. 11:15b). And the plan worked: *"So while Joab had the city under siege, he put Uriah at a place where he knew the strongest defenders were.*

17 When the men of the city came out and fought against Joab, some of the men in David's army fell; moreover, Uriah the Hittite died." (2 Sam. 11:16-17) The report came to David from the field- Uriah was dead.

David then quickly married Bathsheba, after her time of mourning: "After the time of mourning was over, David had her brought to his house, and she became his wife and bore him a son. But the thing David had done displeased the Lord." (2 Sam. 11:27). David would soon feel the consequences of his sin!

Nathan, the prophet, boldly approached king David on the Lord's prompting and told David a story: *"There were two men in a certain town, one rich and the other poor. The rich man had a very large number of sheep and cattle, but the poor man had nothing except one little ewe lamb he had bought. He raised it, and it grew up with him and his children. It shared his food, drank from his cup and even slept in his arms. It was like a daughter to him. "Now a traveler came to the rich man, but the rich man refrained from taking one of his own sheep or cattle to prepare a meal for the traveler who had come to him. Instead, he took the ewe lamb that belonged to the poor man and prepared it for the one who had come to him." David burned with anger against the man and said to Nathan, "As surely as the Lord lives, the man who did this must die! He must pay for that lamb four times over, because he did such a thing and had no pity."* (2 Sam. 12:1b-6) Then David was to hear a startling Word from God- *"You are the man! This is what the Lord, the God of Israel, says: 'I anointed you king over Israel, and I delivered you from the hand of Saul. I gave your master's house to you, and your master's wives into your arms. I gave you all Israel and Judah. And if all this had been too little, I would have given you even more. Why did you despise the word of the Lord by doing what is evil in his eyes? You struck down Uriah the Hittite with the sword and took his wife to be your own. You killed him with the sword of the Ammonites. Now, therefore, the sword will never depart from your house, because you despised me and took the wife of Uriah the Hittite to be your own.' "This is what the Lord says: 'Out of your own household I am going to bring calamity on you. Before your very eyes I will take your wives and give them to one who is close to you, and he will sleep with your wives in broad daylight. You did it in secret, but I will do this thing in broad daylight before all Israel.'"* (2 Sam. 12:7b-12). What David thought was a secret was never hidden from God. What David thought he could get away with from his position and power, he would pay a terrible price- calamity within David's household, and a public display of adultery with one of his wives. And the sword "would never depart from your house"!

David's response was honest and full of remorse and regret: "I have sinned against the Lord" (2 Sam. 12:13b) And there was more heartbreak to come, for the Lord "struck the child that Uriah's wife had borne to David, and he became ill" (2 Sam. 12:15b). David pled with God and fasted, but on the seventh day the child died (2 Sam. 12:16-17). So overcome with grief was David that his servants hesitated to tell him his son was dead. But David surprised them with his changed attitude*: "While the child was still alive, I fasted and wept. I thought, 'Who knows? The Lord may be gracious to me and let the child live.' But now that he is dead, why should I go on fasting? Can I bring him back again? I will go to him, but he will not return to me."* (2 Sam. 12:22b-23). And the most encouraging part of the story, to me at least, is the clear evidence that God is the God of "second chances". He has

certainly been that for me- not to mention “third chances”, “fourth chances” and “I can’t believe I’m giving you another chance after all your sin” chances! David comforted Bathsheba, and made love to her and they soon were to have Solomon- the king that would bring Israel to its highest power, glory and influence among the family of nations. God is so merciful- and has mercy when we don’t deserve or even ask for it. God even gave Solomon the name “Jedediah”, which means “loved by God” (2 Sam. 12:25).

Meanwhile, David consolidated his gains on the battlefield, overcoming the fortressed city Rabbah of the Ammonites, and put the Ammonites into perpetual servitude to Israel: *“Meanwhile Joab fought against Rabbah of the Ammonites and captured the royal citadel. Joab then sent messengers to David, saying, “I have fought against Rabbah and taken its water supply.[8] Now muster the rest of the troops and besiege the city and capture it. Otherwise I will take the city, and it will be named after me.” So David mustered the entire army and went to Rabbah, and attacked and captured it. David took the crown from their king’s head, and it was placed on his own head. It weighed a talent of gold, and it was set with precious stones. David took a great quantity of plunder from the city and brought out the people who were there, consigning them to labor with saws and with iron picks and axes, and he made them work at brickmaking. David did this to all the Ammonite towns. Then he and his entire army returned to Jerusalem.* (2 Sam. 12:26-31)

Luke 19:28-48

Now it was time for Jesus to return to Jerusalem- this would be the “end game” of his ministry on earth. Jesus went to Jerusalem knowing what lay in wait for Him there- his enemies and their plots to remove Him and destroy His following- if they could. Yet Jesus both loved Jerusalem, prayed for her and grieved for her, and was resolute in following His Father’s will. So he sent His disciples to fetch a “colt” that had never been ridden on. He knew this is the way He must enter the city- as had been prophesied by Zechariah : “*Do not be afraid, O Daughter of Zion; see, your king is coming, seated on a donkey's colt*.” (Zech. 9:9) Jesus gave His instructions: *“Go to the village ahead of you, and as you enter it, you will find a colt tied there, which no one has ever ridden. Untie it and bring it here. If anyone asks you, ‘Why are you untying it?’ say, ‘The Lord needs it.’” Those who were sent ahead went and found it just as he had told them. As they were untying the colt, its owners asked them, “Why are you untying the colt?” They replied, “The Lord needs it.”* (Luke 19:30-34). And then Jesus entered the city, to the praise and shouts of *““Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord!”*
“Peace in heaven and glory in the highest!”” (Luke 19:38) and rode on a road covered with the cloaks of the people. They demonstrated their great love for Him by shedding what was probably their most valuable possession, their cloak!

As was almost always true, the Pharisees in the crowd objected strongly to this display: Some of the Pharisees in the crowd said to Jesus, “Teacher, rebuke your disciples!” 40 “I tell you,” he replied, “if they keep quiet, the stones will cry out.” (Luke 19:39-40). So even the “rocks” would cry out if the people were silent- how powerful is the Lord of the universe! Jesus then both wept and prophesied over

Jerusalem: *"As he approached Jerusalem and saw the city, he wept over it and said, "If you, even you, had only known on this day what would bring you peace—but now it is hidden from your eyes. The days will come upon you when your enemies will build an embankment against you and encircle you and hem you in on every side. They will dash you to the ground, you and the children within your walls. They will not leave one stone on another, because you did not recognize the time of God's coming to you."* (Luke 19:41-44).

Later, to make the day for His enemies even more tumultuous, Jesus "destroyed the good mood" of the day by chasing out and turning over the tables of the money changers and sellers of sacrificial animals. The Law required that coins used in sacrifice did not bear a "graven image"- and the coins of the day had Caesar's image on them. These were exchanged for "temple coins" which had no such image. In many cases, those selling animals for sacrifice charged outrageous prices for the animals, taking advantage of the poor. See more at: (http://christianity.about.com/od/New-Testament/a/JZ-Money-Changers.htm)
Jesus was outraged that the Temple had been transformed by greed from a "house of prayer" to a "den of robbers". After cleansing the temple, He taught there during the week. *"It is written," he said to them, "'My house will be a house of prayer'; but you have made it 'a den of robbers.'" Every day he was teaching at the temple. But the chief priests, the teachers of the law and the leaders among the people were trying to kill him. Yet they could not find any way to do it, because all the people hung on his words."* (Luke 19:46b-48) The enemies of Jesus had a real problem- they could hardly take Jesus into custody in broad daylight lest a riot break out- so they schemed and planned to do their evil under the cover of darkness.

Treasures of the Bible (Jesus' Ministry) -- Jesus Drives Out the Money Changers from the Temple

2 Samuel 13-14 April 25, 2014 Luke 20:1-26

God warned David that "the sword will never depart from your house" (2 Sam. 12:10), and this ominous warning was about to be played out within David's family- and specifically in the strife and bloodshed among his children. Having been the "shepherd" of a dysfunctional family for about 20+ years, I can empathize with David's distress. At least our family did not have to deal with rape and murder! Amnon had a strong desire for his half- sister Tamar whom the Scripture describes as "beautiful" (2 Sam. 13:1). He became so obsessed with her *"that he made himself ill. She was a virgin, and it seemed impossible for him to do anything to her."* (2 Sam. 13:2b). So he devised a plan with the help of: *"an adviser named Jonadab son of Shimeah, David's brother. Jonadab was a very shrewd man."* (2 Sam. 13:3b). The plan was that Amnon was to pretend to be ill, and have his sister (actually half-sister) feed him "by hand" after he had gotten her alone with him (2 Sam. 13:5-10). But when Tamar offered her brother Amnon the bread she had prepared, *"he grabbed her and said, "Come to bed with me, my sister."* (2 Sam. 13:11b). Tamar was horrified and said: *"No, my brother!" she said to him. "Don't force me! Such a thing should not be done in Israel! Don't do this wicked thing. What about me? Where could I get rid of my disgrace? And what about you? You would be like one of the wicked fools in Israel. Please speak to the king; he will not keep me from being married to you." But he refused to listen to her, and since he was stronger than she, he raped her."* (2 Sam. 13:12-14).

Then Amnon : *"hated her with intense hatred. In fact, he hated her more than he had loved her. Amnon said to her, "Get up and get out!"* (2 Sam. 13:15b). Some psychiatrist could retire on all the trauma so far, but there was more to come. Sometimes we "hate" the very things we say that we "love"- what seems to count is the intensity of our feelings- there is a very fine dividing line between love and hate. Just ask anyone who has been divorced, like me!

Tamar protested to her brother*: "No!" she said to him. "Sending me away would be a greater wrong than what you have already done to me."* (2 Sam. 13:16). The rejection was worse than the rape- he was now casting her aside like something worthless. Amnon's cruely was immense: *"But he refused to listen to her. He called his personal servant and said, "Get this woman out of my sight and bolt the door after her." So his servant put her out and bolted the door after her. She was wearing an ornate robe, for this was the kind of garment the virgin daughters of the king wore. Tamar put ashes on her head and tore the ornate robe she was wearing. She put her hands on her head and went away, weeping aloud as she went."* (2 Sam. 13:16b-19) Absalom, Tamar's brother, immediately suspected something terrible had happened, and he immediately though of Amnon: *"Her brother Absalom said to her, "Has that Amnon, your brother, been with you? Be quiet for now, my sister; he is your brother. Don't take this thing to heart." And Tamar lived in her brother Absalom's house, a desolate woman. When King David heard all this, he was*

furious. And Absalom never said a word to Amnon, either good or bad; he hated Amnon because he had disgraced his sister Tamar." (2 Sam. 13:20-22).

Then two years go by, and the outrage committed to Tamar has not been forgotten. It may have, in fact, festered into anger greater than the original anger over this rape. Absalom finally had an opportunity to exact revenge on his brother Amnon. This is how the story unfolded: *"Two years later, when Absalom's sheepshearers were at Baal Hazor near the border of Ephraim, he invited all the king's sons to come there. Absalom went to the king and said, "Your servant has had shearers come. Will the king and his attendants please join me?" "No, my son," the king replied. "All of us should not go; we would only be a burden to you." Although Absalom urged him, he still refused to go but gave him his blessing. Then Absalom said, "If not, please let my brother Amnon come with us." The king asked him, "Why should he go with you?" But Absalom urged him, so he sent with him Amnon and the rest of the king's sons. Absalom ordered his men, "Listen! When Amnon is in high spirits from drinking wine and I say to you, 'Strike Amnon down,' then kill him. Don't be afraid. Haven't I given you this order? Be strong and brave." So Absalom's men did to Amnon what Absalom had ordered. Then all the king's sons got up, mounted their mules and fled.*(2 Sam. 13:23-29). Now who says the Scripture is a "fairy tale" and doesn't relate the real struggles of real people? First rape, then revenge murder. Hardly the stuff of fairy tales!

Davis then got a false report: *"Absalom has struck down all the king's sons; not one of them is left." The king stood up, tore his clothes and lay down on the ground; and all his attendants stood by with their clothes torn.* (2 Sam. 13:30b-31). Then the report was corrected, but it was still a tragic one*: "But Jonadab son of Shimeah, David's brother, said, "My lord should not think that they killed all the princes; only Amnon is dead. This has been Absalom's express intention ever since the day Amnon raped his sister Tamar. My lord the king should not be concerned about the report that all the king's sons are dead. Only Amnon is dead."* (2 Sam. 13:32b-33). And the Scripture reports that, not surprisingly, *"Meanwhile, Absalom had fled."* (2 Sam. 13:34a). Absalom took refuge with *"Talmai son of Ammihud, the king of Geshur."* (2 Sam. 13:37b). David mourned for his son Amnon, but also wanted to reunite with his son Absalom

David continued to mourn for his son Absalom, despite his murder of David's sin Amnon. Others knew about David's dilemma, and Joab decided to act through a "wise woman" who lived in Tekoa: *"Joab son of Zeruiah knew that the king's heart longed for Absalom. So Joab sent someone to Tekoa and had a wise woman brought from there. He said to her, "Pretend you are in mourning. Dress in mourning clothes, and don't use any cosmetic lotions. Act like a woman who has spent many days grieving for the dead. Then go to the king and speak these words to him." And Joab put the words in her mouth."* (2 Sam. 14:1-3) The situation was delicate- the king could not truly overlook such a serious crime, but he longed to have his son return to him. After the "wise woman" told him a fabricated story with details like those of David's own family, he then heard the woman say: *"Why then have you devised a thing like this against the people of God? When the king says this, does he not convict himself, for the king has not brought back his banished son? Like water spilled on the ground, which cannot be recovered, so we must die. But that is*

not what God desires; rather, he devises ways so that a banished person does not remain banished from him." (2 Sam 14:13b-14) David suspected Joab's hand was in this elaborate scheme, and asked: The king asked, *"Isn't the hand of Joab with you in all this?"*
The woman answered, "As surely as you live, my lord the king, no one can turn to the right or to the left from anything my lord the king says. Yes, it was your servant Joab who instructed me to do this and who put all these words into the mouth of your servant. Your servant Joab did this to change the present situation. My lord has wisdom like that of an angel of God—he knows everything that happens in the land." The king said to Joab, "Very well, I will do it. Go, bring back the young man Absalom." (2 Sam. 14:19b-21). David wished his son be returned, but he stipulated that Absalom "not see him": *"Then Joab went to Geshur and brought Absalom back to Jerusalem. But the king said, "He must go to his own house; he must not see my face." So Absalom went to his own house and did not see the face of the king."* (2 Sam. 14:23-24). It has been suggested that David had mixed feelings about Absalom- on the one hand he loved and missed his presence, and on the other he couldn't stand the sight of him (http://www.keyway.ca/htm2002/absalom.htm). Finally, after two years father and son were reunited. As the Scripture tells us: "So Joab went to the king and told him this. Then the king summoned Absalom, and he came in and bowed down with his face to the ground before the king. And the king kissed Absalom." (2 Sam. 14:33). The Scripture describes Absalom as handsome and charming: *"In all Israel there was not a man so highly praised for his handsome appearance as Absalom. From the top of his head to the sole of his foot there was no blemish in him. Whenever he cut the hair of his head—he used to cut his hair once a year because it became too heavy for him—he would weigh it, and its weight was two hundred shekels[d] by the royal standard. Three sons and a daughter were born to Absalom. His daughter's name was Tamar, and she became a beautiful woman."* (2 Sam. 14:25-27). This charming and handsome man was to prove to be a source of enormous grief and pain for his father David, the king.

Luke 20:1-26

Authority- always a key issue in deciding who one will follow, and how closely. Jesus' enemies knew if they could successfully challenge Jesus' authority then His influence would lessen. So once again, they tried to trap Him in a "clever" question: *"Tell us by what authority you are doing these things," they said. "Who gave you this authority?"* (Luke 20:2). In typical rabbinical fashion, Jesus answers the question with another question: He replied, *"I will also ask you a question. Tell me: [4] John's baptism—was it from heaven, or of human origin?"* (Luke 20:3-4). The enemies of Jesus were now trapped- they couldn't say John's baptism was from heaven- or else Jesus would ask them why they didn't believe in it, if from men then they risked the anger of the people. Once again, the limited human mind challenged the divine, and the divine knowledge and wisdom prevailed! So they answered: *"We don't know where it was from."* (Luke 20:7b) And Jesus then told them: *"Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things."* (Luke 20:8b)

Just in case the Pharisees and others who resented Jesus had missed the point of His coming, and His real authority, He told them a parable about tenants (Luke 20:9-

19). In the story, a man planted a vineyard, and rented the vineyard to some "farmers" and then went away on a long trip. Then he sent a series of servants to the vineyard to request some of the fruit that had been raised. But the "farmers" were very cruel, they beat two of them and sent them away empty handed. The owner finally decided to send his son, reasoning that*: I will send my son, whom I love; perhaps they will respect him.' "But when the tenants saw him, they talked the matter over. 'This is the heir,' they said. 'Let's kill him, and the inheritance will be ours.' So they threw him out of the vineyard and killed him."* (Luke 20:13b-15), Then Jesus asked: *"What then will the owner of the vineyard do to them? 16 He will come and kill those tenants and give the vineyard to others."* (Luke 20:15b-16). The Jesus turned to His enemies and said plainly: *"Then what is the meaning of that which is written:*

"'The stone the builders rejected
has become the cornerstone'?

Everyone who falls on that stone will be broken to pieces; anyone on whom it falls will be crushed." (Luke 20:17b-18)

It was certain that those "enemies" who heard this knew what Jesus meant- they were the ones deserving of death because of their truly awful stewardship of God's Law, and that they were the ones who had rejected Jesus- the very cornerstone of the Kingdom of God! Their reaction was unfortunately very predictable*: "The teachers of the law and the chief priests looked for a way to arrest him immediately, because they knew he had spoken this parable against them. But they were afraid of the people."* (Luke 20:19).

Parable of the Tenant Courtesy WordPress
http://kingdomnewtestament.wordpress.com/tag/pharisees/

Then another challenge was presented to Jesus- the issue of the legality of paying "taxes to Caesar" This time the "spies" hoped to trap Jesus and turn him over to the governor, whose civil authority they could use to cause trouble for Jesus, whom they now saw clearly as an "enemy". Their question seemed clever enough- at least to them: *"Teacher, we know that you speak and teach what is right, and that you do not show partiality but teach the way of God in accordance with the truth. Is it right for us to pay taxes to Caesar or not?"* (Luke 20:21b-22). And Jesus answered with another question*: "Show me a denarius. Whose image and inscription are on it?"* (Luke 20:24). After they correctly answered "Caesar's", Jesus then told them: *"Then give back to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's."* (Luke 20:25b). And the Scripture records that this answer astonished them: *"They were unable to trap him in what he had said there in public. And astonished by his answer, they became silent."* (Luke 20:26).

2 Samuel 15-16 April 26. 2014 Luke 20:27-47

Some have suggested that Absalom should have been a politician. He knew how to 1) appear handsome and attractive, 2) to say what people wanted to hear; and 3) to pretend to be concerned about the people (modern day "constituents"). Absalom did all these things, but only out of motivation to gain personal power- another mark of a true political survivor. Power and influence are the "coin of the realm"- then and now. What Absalom did was actually clever and well thought out: *"He would get up early and stand by the side of the road leading to the city gate. Whenever anyone came with a complaint to be placed before the king for a decision, Absalom would call out to him, "What town are you from?" He would answer, "Your servant is from one of the tribes of Israel." Then Absalom would say to him, "Look, your claims are valid and proper, but there is no representative of the king to hear you." And Absalom would add, "If only I were appointed judge in the land! Then everyone who has a complaint or case could come to me and I would see that they receive justice." Also, whenever anyone approached him to bow down before him, Absalom would reach out his hand, take hold of him and kiss him. Absalom behaved in this way toward all the Israelites who came to the king asking for justice, and so he stole the hearts of the people of Israel."* (2 Sam 15:2-6). And it was effective- for Absalom "stole the hearts of the people". His real motive was to gain power and influence, so at the appropriate time he had his "associates" declare loudly: *"Absalom is king in Hebron."* (2 Sam. 15:10b). The outcry touched a chord in the people's hearts, and as they thought about Absalom's appearance and behavior, perhaps this seemed like a good idea. Regardless, this was the beginning of a conspiracy against King David. The Scripture tells us *"And so the conspiracy gained strength, and Absalom's following kept on increasing."* (2 Sam. 15:12b)

David was told "by messenger" that: "The hearts of the people of Israel are with Absalom." (2 Sam. 15:13b). So David fled Jerusalem: "*Then David said to all his officials who were with him in Jerusalem, "Come! We must flee, or none of us will escape from Absalom. We must leave immediately, or he will move quickly to overtake us and bring ruin on us and put the city to the sword." The king's officials answered him, "Your servants are ready to do whatever our lord the king chooses."* (2 Sam. 15:14-15) Amazingly, David left "ten concubines" to take care of the palace. Did David really think that was adequate? Were they there to defend the

palace from Absalom? Accompanying David were "six hundred Gittites who had accompanied him from Gath". Among them was Ittai, who had recently joined David's company, and David told him he was free to join Absalom- that he owed David no special loyalty. But Ittai was apparently loyal from the start. David asked Ittai *"Why should you come along with us? Go back and stay with King Absalom. You are a foreigner, an exile from your homeland. 20 You came only yesterday. And today shall I make you wander about with us, when I do not know where I am going? Go back, and take your people with you. May the Lord show you kindness and faithfulness."* (2 Sam. 15:19b-20). Ittai's answer shows his almost instant loyalty to David: "But Ittai replied to the king, *"As surely as the Lord lives, and as my lord the king lives, wherever my lord the king may be, whether it means life or death, there will your servant be."* (2 Sam. 15:21) Apparently all the people were not convinced that Absalom should be their leader: *"The whole countryside wept aloud as all the people passed by. The king also crossed the Kidron Valley, and all the people moved on toward the wilderness."* (2 Sam. 15:23) Zadok and some of the priests took the ark out of Jerusalem, presumably to follow David and allow for sacrifice and worship, but David ordered that the ark be returned to Jerusalem. (2 Sam. 15:24-29). Then David got the word that Ahithophel, his trusted counselor, had deserted him and gone over to the side of Absalom's rebellion: *"But David continued up the Mount of Olives, weeping as he went; his head was covered and he was barefoot. All the people with him covered their heads too and were weeping as they went up. Now David had been told, "Ahithophel is among the conspirators with Absalom." So David prayed, "Lord, turn Ahithophel's counsel into foolishness."* (2 Sam. 15:30-31) david then devised a plan to subvert Ahithophel's advice to Absalom, and also to gain intelligence about Absalom and his plans- he employed Hushai the Arkite, whom he met at the Mount of Olives. Hushai was in mourning for the apparent overthrow of David as king: *When David arrived at the summit, where people used to worship God, Hushai the Arkitewas there to meet him, his robe torn and dust on his head. David said to him, "If you go with me, you will be a burden to me. But if you return to the city and say to Absalom, 'Your Majesty, I will be your servant; I was your father's servant in the past, but now I will be your servant,' then you can help me by frustrating Ahithophel's advice. Won't the priests Zadok and Abiathar be there with you? Tell them anything you hear in the king's palace. Their two sons, Ahimaaz son of Zadok and Jonathan son of Abiathar, are there with them. Send them to me with anything you hear." So Hushai, David's confidant, arrived at Jerusalem as Absalom was entering the city.* (2 Sam. 15:32-37).

David then encountered Ziba, the *"steward of Mephibosheth"*, and asked him why he had brought with him: *"a string of donkeys saddled and loaded with two hundred loaves of bread, a hundred cakes of raisins, a hundred cakes of figs and a skin of wine."* (2 Sam. 16:1b). Ziba answered that they were for the use of David and his men. David then asked Ziba where Mephibosheth was, and was told: *"He is staying in Jerusalem, because he thinks, 'Today the Israelites will restore to me my grandfather's kingdom.'"* (2 Sam. 16:3b). A falso hope, to be sure. There was exactly zero chance that Absalom had acted to restore Saul's family to the throne of Israel! David quickly rewarded Ziba's loyalty and good sense: *"Then the king said to Ziba, "All that belonged to Mephibosheth is now yours." "I humbly bow," Ziba said. "May I find favor in your eyes, my lord the king."* (2 Sam. 16:4)

Then as David approached Bahurim (a village east of Jerusalem, on the road to the Jordan valley, close to Mount of Olives-Wikipedia-http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bahurim), he is cursed soundly and roundly by Shimei son of Gera: "Get out, get out, you murderer, you scoundrel! 8 The Lord has repaid you for all the blood you shed in the household of Saul, in whose place you have reigned. The Lord has given the kingdom into the hands of your son Absalom. You have come to ruin because you are a murderer!" (2 Sam. 16:7b-8) Immediately David's nephew and leader of the army, Abishai (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Abishai_(biblical_figure) offered to remove this offense by killing Shimei : *"Why should this dead dog curse my lord the king? Let me go over and cut off his head."* (2 Sam. 16:9b). But David relented, but remembered the incident as we shall see later. David told Abishai and his officials: *"My son, my own flesh and blood, is trying to kill me. How much more, then, this Benjamite! Leave him alone; let him curse, for the Lord has told him to. It may be that the Lord will look upon my misery and restore to me his covenant blessing instead of his curse today." So David and his men continued along the road while Shimei was going along the hillside opposite him, cursing as he went and throwing stones at him and showering him with dirt. The king and all the people with him arrived at their destination exhausted."* (2 Sam. 16:11b-13) Certainly not a "fun trip"!

David's "spy" Hushai was first questioned, and then accepted by Absalom and his men. (2 Sam. 16:15-19) Remember how Nathan had told David that his concubines would be shamed- and in public? This came to pass when Ahithophel told Absalom: *"Sleep with your father's concubines whom he left to take care of the palace. Then all Israel will hear that you have made yourself obnoxious to your father, and the hands of everyone with you will be more resolute."* (2 Sam. 16:21b). But the wheels were already turning- David had his man in place to subvert and at least partially nullify the advice of Ahithophel, which was regarded as: like that of one who inquires of God. (2 Sam. 16:23b)

Luke 20:27-47

The Sadducees, who did not believe in the resurrection (they were sad, you see!) asked Jesus about marriage and the resurrection. It is not entirely clear why they would ask about something they denied theologically, but their purpose may have been to "stump" the Master or catch Him in a "contradiction of the Law". The question posed was about an elaborate series of events in which a husband dies, after which his brother marries his wife (a Jewish tradition to keep the line of descent alive and intact- Deut. 25:5 –(http://robinhl.com/2012/03/21/levirate-marriage-you-must-marry-your-brothers-widow/). Then that brother dies, and a succession of seven brothers who marry the woman and die, and finally the woman dies. The question posed to Jesus was: *"Now then, at the resurrection whose wife will she be, since the seven were married to her?"* (Luke 20:33). Jesus' answer to them was given to show them two things: 1) they did not understand how all of us will be related in heaven; and 2) that there really is a resurrection, since God is the *"God of Abraham and Isaac"* and that God is the God of the "living and not the dead" (Luke 20:34-38). Apparently very impressed by Jesus' teaching they said: "*Well said, teacher!"* (Luke 20:39)

Jesus then poses an interesting question to the "experts": *"Why is it said that the Messiah is the son of David? David himself declares in the Book of Psalms:*
"'The Lord said to my Lord:
"Sit at my right hand
until I make your enemies
a footstool for your feet."'
David calls him 'Lord.' How then can he be his son?" (Luke 20:41b-44)

Jesus is penetrating the "veil of unbelief" of the experts- they could not see that Jesus was both the descendant (in the physical line of descent) of David, and as Son of God he was also David's "Lord"! The "experts" could not answer this, but Jesus knew- and clearly demonstrated His superior knowledge.

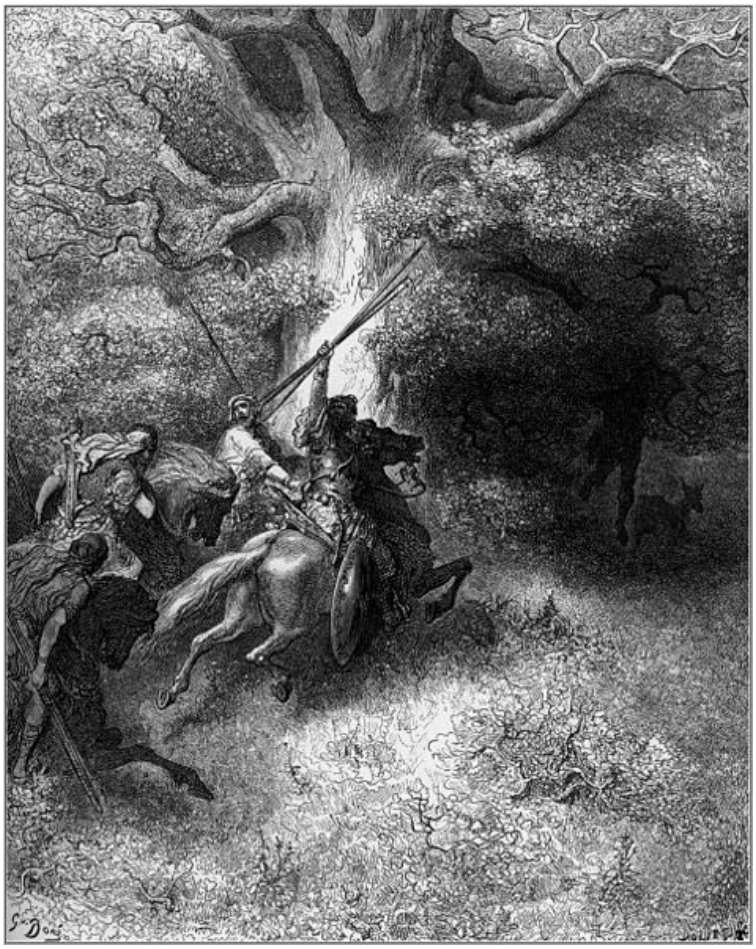
The Jesus- in public- said: *"Beware of the teachers of the law. They like to walk around in flowing robes and love to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces and have the most important seats in the synagogues and the places of honor at banquets. They devour widows' houses and for a show make lengthy prayers. These men will be punished most severely."* (Luke 20:45-47) It is clear that this challenge and questioning of authority were remembered by the "experts", and surely moved them even closer to their plan of action to remove Jesus.

2 Samuel 17-18 April 27, 2014 Luke 21:1-19

And now the treachery and rebellion of Absalom is finally dealt with. David's envoy and confidant, Hushai the Arkite, was in position both to give "bad advice" to Absalom and also report to David hat Absalom's bathe plans were. First Ahithophel gave his advice: *"I would[a] choose twelve thousand men and set out tonight in pursuit of David. I would attack him while he is weary and weak. I would strike him with terror, and then all the people with him will flee. I would strike down only the king and bring all the people back to you. The death of the man you seek will mean the return of all; all the people will be unharmed." This plan seemed good to Absalom and to all the elders of Israel.* (2 Sam. 17:1b-4) Then it was Hushai's turn: *"The advice Ahithophel has given is not good this time. You know your father and his men; they are fighters, and as fierce as a wild bear robbed of her cubs. Besides, your father is an experienced fighter; he will not spend the night with the troops. Even now, he is hidden in a cave or some other place. If he should attack your troops first, whoever hears about it will say, 'There has been a slaughter among the troops who follow Absalom.' Then even the bravest soldier, whose heart is like the heart of a lion, will melt with fear, for all Israel knows that your father is a fighter and that those with him are brave. "So I advise you: Let all Israel, from Dan to Beersheba—as numerous as the sand on the seashore—be gathered to you, with you yourself leading them into battle. Then we will attack him wherever he may be found, and we will fall on him as dew settles on the ground. Neither he nor any of his men will be left alive. If he withdraws into a city, then all Israel will bring ropes to that city, and we will drag it down to the valley until not so much as a pebble is left."* (2 Sam. 17:7b-13). So the Lord had determined to end Absalom's rebellion by causing him to listen to Hushai rather than Ahithophel (2 Sam. 17:14) The Hushai sent word of this to David through Zadok the priest: *"Ahithophel has advised Absalom and the elders of Israel to do such and such, but I have advised them to do*

so and so. Now send a message at once and tell David, 'Do not spend the night at the fords in the wilderness; cross over without fail, or the king and all the people with him will be swallowed up.'" (2 Sam. 17:15b-16) Ahithophel was so troubled that Absalom did not take his advice that he killed himself! (2 Sam. 17:23).

So David mustered his army, splitting it into three divisions, each commanded by a trusted and proven warrior. David was convinced to stay behind "in the city" so that he might escape harm. But he pled with his army *"Be gentle with the young man Absalom for my sake."* (2 Sam. 18:5)
The battle went well for David's men: *"David's army marched out of the city to fight Israel, and the battle took place in the forest of Ephraim. There Israel's troops were routed by David's men, and the casualties that day were great—twenty thousand men. The battle spread out over the whole countryside, and the forest swallowed up more men that day than the sword."* (2 Sam. 18:6-8) And Absalom was discovered by David's men, as he had snagged his hair on a limb and hung helpless under an oak tree. He was then killed by Joab and his armor bearers (2 Sam. 18:9-15). They then took Absalom, *"threw him into a big pit in the forest and piled up a large heap of rocks over him."* (2 Sam. 18:17b). And David, hearing the terrible news, morned bitterly for his lost son: *"O my son Absalom! My son, my son Absalom! If only I had died instead of you—O Absalom, my son, my son!"* (2 Sam. 18:33b). Nathan's prophesies had now been fulfilled- there was certainly a sword in David's family.



The Death of Absalom by Gustave Dore

Luke 21:1-19

Dave Ramsey, the popular radio personality and founder of Financial Peace University, has gone on record as being critical of the teaching of Jesus in Luke 21:1-4. His argument is simple- we should never give out of the funds needed to survive- food, shelter and clothing for the family are needs- and there can be "guilt trips" from teaching this passage the wrong way. What I personally think Jesus is teaching here is extravagance in giving- jest as God is extravagant in His gifts to us, and giving out of total reliance on Him as provider. Sacrificial should mean just that- we "give up" something we don't need to "really give"! Jesus holds us the example of the woman, whose two coins were *"all she had to live on"* (Luke 21:5).

Then the subject turns to the "end times". Jesus tells His disciples that there are unmistakable signs of the end of everything- the Temple will be destroyed, and then more signs and warnings will come: *"Watch out that you are not deceived. For many will come in my name, claiming, 'I am he,' and, 'The time is near.' Do not follow them. When you hear of wars and uprisings, do not be frightened. These things must happen first, but the end will not come right away."*

Then he said to them: "Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. There will be great earthquakes, famines and pestilences in various places, and fearful events and great signs from heaven.

"But before all this, they will seize you and persecute you. They will hand you over to synagogues and put you in prison, and you will be brought before kings and governors, and all on account of my name. And so you will bear testimony to me. But make up your mind not to worry beforehand how you will defend yourselves. For I will give you words and wisdom that none of your adversaries will be able to resist or contradict. You will be betrayed even by parents, brothers and sisters, relatives and friends, and they will put some of you to death. Everyone will hate you because of me. But not a hair of your head will perish. Stand firm, and you will win life." (Luke 21:8b-19). The emphasis Jesus is giving seems to be that in the power of the Spirit- which is to come in full at Pentecost- the believer can truly "stand firm".

2 Samuel 19-20 April 28, 2014 Luke 21:20-38

It was one thing to mourn for Absalom. David, however, let his obvious and real grief over the death of his son to cause him to lose perspective- his forces had won- the revolt was over and its leader was dead. So David's general reminded him how important it was for David to honor his army who had fought so well and bravely to conquer the city and recover the kingdom for David. Joab said: *"Today you have humiliated all your men, who have just saved your life and the lives of your sons and daughters and the lives of your wives and concubines. You love those who hate you and hate those who love you. You have made it clear today that the commanders and their men mean nothing to you. I see that you would be pleased if Absalom were alive today and all of us were dead. Now go out and encourage your men. I swear by the Lord that if you don't go out, not a man will be left with you by nightfall. This will be worse for you than all the calamities that have come on you from your youth till now."* (2 Sam. 19:5b-7). David soon was able to win over the hearts and minds of the men of Judah, and they urged David to return to his rightful place as king: *"He won over the hearts of the men of Judah so that they were all of one mind. They sent word to the king, "Return, you and all your men." Then the king returned and went as far as the Jordan."* (2 Sam. 19:14-15).

Remember Shimei- the man who cursed David and threw rocks at David and his men? He was among the first to greet David on his return, and begged David for his life*: "May my lord not hold me guilty. Do not remember how your servant did wrong on the day my lord the king left Jerusalem. May the king put it out of his mind. For I your servant know that I have sinned, but today I have come here as the first from the tribes of Joseph to come down and meet my lord the king."* (2 Sam 19:19b-20). And then plan worked, at least for the moment: *"So the king said to Shimei, "You shall not die." And the king promised him on oath."* (2 Sam. 19:23). Mephibosheth, Saul's grandson, who had foolishly stayed in Jerusalem, hoping that Absalom would restore him to leadership in Israel, was also repentant and sorrowful, and begged David for mercy: *"Mephibosheth, Saul's grandson, also went down to meet the king. He had not taken care of his feet or trimmed his mustache or washed his clothes from the day the king left until the day he returned safely. When he came from Jerusalem to meet the king, the king asked him, "Why didn't you go with*

me, Mephibosheth?" He said, "My lord the king, since I your servant am lame, I said, 'I will have my donkey saddled and will ride on it, so I can go with the king.' But Ziba my servant betrayed me. And he has slandered your servant to my lord the king. My lord the king is like an angel of God; so do whatever you wish. All my grandfather's descendants deserved nothing but death from my lord the king, but you gave your servant a place among those who eat at your table. So what right do I have to make any more appeals to the king?" The king said to him, "Why say more? I order you and Ziba to divide the land." Mephibosheth said to the king, "Let him take everything, now that my lord the king has returned home safely." (2 Sam. 19:24-30) I think it is interesting- and sad- that Mephibosheth mentions to David that he is "lame" and that he blamed his servant Ziba for everything. Mephibosheth was "lame" alright- "lame brained"! And acting the "victim" is a favorite way of many to avoid responsibility for one's own actions. David, however, showed mercy to Saul's grandson- offering part of the land to him. As further evidence of David's character and generosity, he offered to "provide for" Barzillai, an older man who had great wealth and had provided for David and his men in the past. Barzillai refused, saying, in essence "I'm too old" and asked David's permission to stay where he was and be buried near his parents' tomb (2 Sam. 19:31-37). He offered David his servant Kimham instead. (2 Sam. 19:37-39). And David bid farewell to Barzillai.

There was friction between the men of Judah and the other tribes of Israel. The "other tribes" thought Judah was getting better consideration and treatment from the king, but the men of Judah replied: *"We did this because the king is closely related to us. Why are you angry about it? Have we eaten any of the king's provisions? Have we taken anything for ourselves?"* (2 Sam. 19:42b).

Another "troublemaker" arrives on the scene, this time it is "a troublemaker named Sheba son of Bikri, a Benjamite" (2 Sam. 20:1). He called Israel into rebellion against David, leaving him only with the men of Judah: Bikri said:

"We have no share in David,
no part in Jesse's son!
Every man to his tent, Israel!"
So all the men of Israel deserted David to follow Sheba son of Bikri. But the men of Judah stayed by their king all the way from the Jordan to Jerusalem. (2 Sam. 20:1b-2).

The ten concubines that David had left in Jerusalem, and that had been violated by Absalom and his men, were then confined until their death: *"When David returned to his palace in Jerusalem, he took the ten concubines he had left to take care of the palace and put them in a house under guard. He provided for them but had no sexual relations with them. They were kept in confinement till the day of their death, living as widows."* (2 Sam. 20:3). My guess is that the humiliation of them was so complete that David could not even bear to see them.

In a very long and convoluted story, the rebel Sheba was tracked down and killed, removing the threat of rebellion which David himself said was more of a threat that Absalom ever was: *"Now Sheba son of Bikri will do us more harm than Absalom did. Take your master's men and pursue him, or he will find fortified cities and escape*

from us." (2 Sam. 20:6b). But Sheba was killed by the people in the city he fled to: *"Then the woman went to all the people with her wise advice, and they cut off the head of Sheba son of Bikri and threw it to Joab. So he sounded the trumpet, and his men dispersed from the city, each returning to his home. And Joab went back to the king in Jerusalem."* (2 Sam. 20:22). This happened only after Joab had threatened to lay siege to the city!

Luke 21:20-38

When the end time comes, there will be clear signs and markers. Our problem in this age is that a) Israel has been restored as a nation; b) there are "wars and rumors of war", and c) there is usually no lack of leaders or would-be leaders who act like the Antichrist. Jesus taught:

"When you see Jerusalem being surrounded by armies, you will know that its desolation is near. Then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains, let those in the city get out, and let those in the country not enter the city. For this is the time of punishment in fulfillment of all that has been written. How dreadful it will be in those days for pregnant women and nursing mothers! There will be great distress in the land and wrath against this people. They will fall by the sword and will be taken as prisoners to all the nations. Jerusalem will be trampled on by the Gentiles until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled." (Luke 20:20-24). The prospect of war in the Middle East is always real, especially today- and Jerusalem could literally be surrounded with enemies as prophesied by Jesus!

Then Jesus makes a statement that has been interpreted, misinterpreted and has led to discussions and even arguments among believers and seekers alike: *"Truly I tell you, this generation will certainly not pass away until all these things have happened. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away."* (Luke 20:32-33) Many have debated the meaning of this teaching, referred to by some scholars as the "Olivet Discourse", since the Scripture records that Jesus taught in the Temple but stayed at the Mount of Olives at night during this part of the last week of His earthly life. (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Olivet_Discourse) According to Wikipedia, the author C.S. Lewis described this as: "the most embarrassing verse in the Bible".

Without getting thoroughly bogged down in this debate, I would offer that the partial fulfillment of this prophesy was the filling of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, historically well within the lifetimes of those hearing Jesus' words- His kingdom did come- in power- when God filled His people with the Spirit! The best advice for all of us is to heed Jesus' words near the end of this discourse:
"Be always on the watch, and pray that you may be able to escape all that is about to happen, and that you may be able to stand before the Son of Man." (Luke 20:36). So, to truly follow Jesus and be ready for His coming, we should "watch and pray"!

2 Samuel 21-22 April 29, 2014 Luke 22:1-30

Why was there famine in Israel?-the answer came from seeking the Lord- the Gibeonites, whom Saul had put to death- were the problem and the issue. So David asked the Gibeonites what could be done to appease them, and they demanded seven men of Saul's family to be put to death and their bodies exposed in shame. The Scripture explains the source of the problem: *(Now the Gibeonites were not a part of Israel but were survivors of the Amorites; the Israelites had sworn to spare them, but Saul in his zeal for Israel and Judah had tried to annihilate them.)* (2 Sam. 21:2b). So David agreed, and seven persons were selected- but not Mephibosheth whom David had sworn to protect. Those selected were: " *Armoni and Mephibosheth, the two sons of Aiah's daughter Rizpah, whom she had borne to Saul, together with the five sons of Saul's daughter Merab, whom she had borne to Adriel son of Barzillai the Meholathite. 9 He handed them over to the Gibeonites, who killed them and exposed their bodies on a hill before the Lord. All seven of them fell together; they were put to death during the first days of the harvest, just as the barley harvest was beginning."* (2 Sam. 21:8-9) David then gathered the bones of these seven, along with the bones of Saul and Jonathan, and had them given a proper burial at the tomb of Saul's father Kish. And the famine ended: *After that, God answered prayer in behalf of the land.* (2 Sam. 21:14b)

David was then almost killed in a battle with the Philistines. He fought with the army, and a particularly well trained and armed Philistine named Ishbi-Benob. David was saved from destruction by Abishai, who then made David promise not to go into battle and expose himself to danger: *"Never again will you go out with us to battle, so that the lamp of Israel will not be extinguished."* (2 Sam. 21:17b) Four of the descendants of "Raphe of Gath" all large and mighty warriors, were killed by David's men. These men gained a reputation due to this and other encounters, and became known as "David's mighty men".

The David expresses his thanks and exultation in the Lord's victory with a song- a beautiful poem which comprises 2 Samuel 22. The poem in part is:

"The Lord is my rock, my fortress and my deliverer;
my God is my rock, in whom I take refuge,
my shield[e] and the horn[f] of my salvation.
He is my stronghold, my refuge and my savior—
from violent people you save me.
"I called to the Lord, who is worthy of praise,
and have been saved from my enemies.
The waves of death swirled about me;
the torrents of destruction overwhelmed me.
The cords of the grave coiled around me;
the snares of death confronted me.
"In my distress I called to the Lord;
I called out to my God.
From his temple he heard my voice;
my cry came to his ears.
The earth trembled and quaked,
the foundations of the heavens[g] shook;
they trembled because he was angry.

Smoke rose from his nostrils;
consuming fire came from his mouth,
burning coals blazed out of it.
He parted the heavens and came down;
dark clouds were under his feet.
He mounted the cherubim and flew;
he soared[h] on the wings of the wind.
He made darkness his canopy around him—
the dark[i] rain clouds of the sky.
Out of the brightness of his presence
bolts of lightning blazed forth. (2 Sam. 22:2-13)

Luke 22:1-30

And now comes the great betrayal. Dante, in his classic Inferno, places three traitors in the lowest circle of Hell- Brutus and Cassius who betrayed Caesar; and Judas Iscariot who betrayed Jesus. So Judas accepts a bribe to turn the Master over to the authorities. Some have suggested that he was a Zealot, and wanted to force Jesus' hand to overthrow Rome with His power. Regardless, it would have been better for him to have "never been born" according to Jesus' words. (Matthew 26:24). The Scripture describes the events this way: *'Then Satan entered Judas, called Iscariot, one of the Twelve. And Judas went to the chief priests and the officers of the temple guard and discussed with them how he might betray Jesus. They were delighted and agreed to give him money. He consented, and watched for an opportunity to hand Jesus over to them when no crowd was present."* (Luke 22:3-5). Notice that the reason stated is that Satan "entered him"- implying so clearly that we- even we who follow Jesus closely- must always be on our guard against the evil one.

It was then time for the celebration of the Passover. Jesus was to transform this event forever by placing Himself and His sacrifice in the center of the celebratory meal, and provided to those with Him and all of us since who follow Him a unique an sacramental way of remembering Him and His great sacrifice for us. In similar fashion to Jesus' directions as to the gathering of a foal/colt for His entry into Jerusalem, Jesus predicted for them what was to happen- the room to be made available. Jesus directed them: *"Go and make preparations for us to eat the Passover." "Where do you want us to prepare for it?" they asked. He replied, "As you enter the city, a man carrying a jar of water will meet you. Follow him to the house that he enters, and say to the owner of the house, 'The Teacher asks: Where is the guest room, where I may eat the Passover with my disciples?' He will show you a large room upstairs, all furnished. Make preparations there." They left and found things just as Jesus had told them. So they prepared the Passover."* (Luke 22:8b-13).

Jesus taught them that the bread and wine were now to be representative of His body and blood, which He was soon to offer for them. He also emphasized the central role that the servant plays in the Kingdom- not the one who sits in a place of honor, but the one who serves. And Jesus modeled that behavior and told them He

was the One who serves. His words to them were: *"Take this and divide it among you. For I tell you I will not drink again from the fruit of the vine until the kingdom of God comes." And he took bread, gave thanks and broke it, and gave it to them, saying, "This is my body given for you; do this in remembrance of me."*
In the same way, after the supper he took the cup, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for you. But the hand of him who is going to betray me is with mine on the table. The Son of Man will go as it has been decreed. But woe to that man who betrays him!" They began to question among themselves which of them it might be who would do this." (Luke 22:17b-23). Jesus, of course, knew who His betrayer was!

Then Jesus has a fascinating comment to make. These ordinary men were to be with Him in the Kingdom and "judge the tribes of Israel". Jesus said to them: *"You are those who have stood by me in my trials. And I confer on you a kingdom, just as my Father conferred one on me, so that you may eat and drink at my table in my kingdom and sit on thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel."* (Luke 22:28-30). This was an unprecedented turn of events!

2 Samuel 23-24 April 30, 2014 Luke 22:31-53

2 Samuel 23 begins with these words: *"These are the last words of David..."* (2 Sam. 23:1) and a beautiful song of praise to God and dedication to His works and ways follows thereafter:

"The inspired utterance of David son of Jesse,
the utterance of the man exalted by the Most High,
the man anointed by the God of Jacob,
the hero of Israel's songs:
"The Spirit of the Lord spoke through me;
his word was on my tongue.
The God of Israel spoke,
the Rock of Israel said to me:
'When one rules over people in righteousness,
when he rules in the fear of God,
he is like the light of morning at sunrise
on a cloudless morning,
like the brightness after rain
that brings grass from the earth.' (2 Sam. 23:1b-4).

David understands, through his long experience with God, just how wonderful it is to be in God's will, and to rule according to God's direction. What a fitting testimony and tribute to God at the end of David's years of service to Him and to Israel!

2 Samuel 23 ends with a description of the names and exploits of "David's mighty warriors" (2 Sa. 23:8b). Some thirty are named, each with a place in the elite of all of David's soldiers and warriors for God. Each contributed in their own way to the furtherance or protection of Israel.

Curiously, David is convinced somehow- certainly not very clear in the Scripture- to take a census of the people of Israel. The Scripture plainly says: *"Again the anger of the Lord burned against Israel, and he incited David against them, saying, "Go and take a census of Israel and Judah."* (2 Sam. 24:1). It seems that God "incited David" and then later was angry at David for following this "direction". Perhaps David took it too far, perhaps David was being tested and should have resisted- trusting entirely on God and not the strength of the army?

After the census, God is angry with David and offers him three "bad options": *"Before David got up the next morning, the word of the Lord had come to Gad the prophet, David's seer: "Go and tell David, 'This is what the Lord says: I am giving you three options. Choose one of them for me to carry out against you.'" So Gad went to David and said to him, "Shall there come on you three[m] years of famine in your land? Or three months of fleeing from your enemies while they pursue you? Or three days of plague in your land? Now then, think it over and decide how I should answer the one who sent me."* (2 Sam. 24:11-13). David choose the plague, and after some seventy thousand people died, God relented and stopped the "angel of destruction": When the angel stretched out his hand to destroy Jerusalem, the LORD relented concerning the disaster and said to the angel who was afflicting the people, *"Enough! Withdraw your hand." The angel of the LORD was then at the threshing floor of Araunah the Jebusite. When David saw the angel who was striking down the people, he said to the LORD, "I have sinned; I, the shepherd have done wrong. These are but sheep. What have they done? Let your hand fall on me and my family."* (2 Sam. 24:16-17). David clearly takes responsibility for this tragedy- he was, after all, the leader of the people and he had called for the census.

Then David builds an altar at a threshing floor. Some scholars tell us that this site was to be the site of the future temple of Israel: The narrative of the Book of Chronicles claims that the altar built by David on the site became the Temple of Solomon, and that the site had formerly been Mount Moriah… (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Araunah). The Jebusite Araunah owned the site, and offered to donate it to the King. David refuses this generosity, and states: *"No, I insist on paying you for it. I will not sacrifice to the Lord my God burnt offerings that cost me nothing."* (2 Sam. 24:24b). And very significantly, when David builds the altar there, and sacrifices to God: *".. the Lord answered his prayer in behalf of the land, and the plague on Israel was stopped."* (2 Sam. 24:25b). So the sacrifice that "costs us something" is acceptable to God- a great lesson to us in our life and worship!

Luke 22:31-53

Jesus then prays for Simon that "your faith will not fail". Simon takes some offense at this, and he protests to Jesus: "Lord, I am ready to go with you to prison and to death." (Luke 22:32-33). Little does Simon know that his faith will, indeed, fail under the pressure of arrest and detention of his Master! Jesus prophesies to Simon: "I tell you, Peter, before the rooster crows today, you will deny three times that you know me." (Luke 22:34b). And then Jesus addresses all the disciples and asks them an interesting question: *"When I sent you without purse, bag or sandals, did you lack anything?" "Nothing," they answered. He said to them, "But now if you*

have a purse, take it, and also a bag; and if you don't have a sword, sell your cloak and buy one. It is written: 'And he was numbered with the transgressors'; and I tell you that this must be fulfilled in me. Yes, what is written about me is reaching its fulfillment." The disciples said, "See, Lord, here are two swords." "That's enough!" he replied." (Luke 22:35b-38) Is Jesus really asking the disciples to "take up the sword" to resist those who were coming to arrest Him? IT would seem clear from the subsequent events that this is not so- when Peter takes the "sword" to a temple guard, Jesus tells him to put it down and heals the guard's ear: When Jesus' followers saw what was going to happen, they said*, "Lord, should we strike with our swords?" 50 And one of them struck the servant of the high priest, cutting off his right ear. But Jesus answered, "No more of this!" And he touched the man's ear and healed him."* (Luke 22:49-51).

Just before His arrest, Jesus prays to His Father and asks to be spared the horrible death and suffering He knows will soon follow. His earnest prayer is to be spared, but He *surrenders* His will to His Father's, and the whole course of history changed! I believe this prayer, and the willingness and surrender that it represents, are the single most important moment in the Gospels except for the Resurrection! We see this clearly in verse 42: *"Father, if you are willing, take this cup from me; yet not my will, but yours be done."* What could be more important than this? Then Jesus was betrayed ""with a kiss" (Luke 22:48b), and faced His captors and challenged them with these words: "Then Jesus said to the chief priests, the officers of the temple guard, and the elders, who had come for him, *"Am I leading a rebellion, that you have come with swords and clubs? Every day I was with you in the temple courts, and you did not lay a hand on me. But this is your hour—when darkness reigns."* (Luke 22:52-53). Darkness was about to reign, but its reign would be short- three days! As the now famous sermon from Dr. Tony Campolo (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tony_Campolo) said,"It's Friday- but Sunday's Coming!"

1 Kings 1-2 May 1, 2014 Luke 22:54-71

Intrigue- treachery- sex- all part of the "real story" of 'real people" in the Old Testament! When David was near death, his attendants decided to "keep him warm" by having a beautiful young woman "serve the king and take care of him" (1 Kings 1:1-4), When they noted David had no interest in this beautiful young girl, they correctly concluded that he was near death. The girl. Abishag the Shunammite, will be seen later in the story of David's final days. The trouble and tumult in david's family was to continue for a while longer, as God had promised- this time from Adonijah, who was eager to assume the throne on David's death: *Now Adonijah, whose mother was Haggith, put himself forward and said, "I will be king." So he got chariots and horses[a] ready, with fifty men to run ahead of him. (His father had never rebuked him by asking, "Why do you behave as you do?" He was also very handsome and was born next after Absalom.)* (1 Kings 1:5-6). It seems that in those times all that was needed was to be in the royal line of descent and to announce that one was the king. Certainly that was the strategy that Adonijah used. And he had success, at least for a time. His "ascension" to the throne was taken seriously by David, Bathsheba, and Solomon- who was the appointed and rightful heir to the throne! So Nathan and Bathsheba approached David to make certain of his wishes for Solomon: *"Then Nathan asked Bathsheba,*

Solomon's mother, "Have you not heard that Adonijah, the son of Haggith, has become king, and our lord David knows nothing about it? Now then, let me advise you how you can save your own life and the life of your son Solomon. Go in to King David and say to him, 'My lord the king, did you not swear to me your servant: "Surely Solomon your son shall be king after me, and he will sit on my throne"? Why then has Adonijah become king?' While you are still there talking to the king, I will come in and add my word to what you have said." (1 Kings 1:11-14). After Bathsheba had an audience with David, pleading Solomon's case (and indirectly, her case as well!). Nathan the prophet spoke to David: Nathan said, *"Have you, my lord the king, declared that Adonijah shall be king after you, and that he will sit on your throne? Today he has gone down and sacrificed great numbers of cattle, fattened calves, and sheep. He has invited all the king's sons, the commanders of the army and Abiathar the priest. Right now they are eating and drinking with him and saying, 'Long live King Adonijah!' But me your servant, and Zadok the priest, and Benaiah son of Jehoiada, and your servant Solomon he did not invite. Is this something my lord the king has done without letting his servants know who should sit on the throne of my lord the king after him?"* (1 Kings 1:24b-27). David then made his wishes very clear- Solomon was to be king, and was to use the same "strategy" as Adonijah: King David said, *"Call in Zadok the priest, Nathan the prophet and Benaiah son of Jehoiada." When they came before the king, he said to them: "Take your lord's servants with you and have Solomon my son mount my own mule and take him down to Gihon. There have Zadok the priest and Nathan the prophet anoint him king over Israel. Blow the trumpet and shout, 'Long live King Solomon!' Then you are to go up with him, and he is to come and sit on my throne and reign in my place. I have appointed him ruler over Israel and Judah." Benaiah son of Jehoiada answered the king, "Amen! May the Lord, the God of my lord the king, so declare it. As the Lord was with my lord the king, so may he be with Solomon to make his throne even greater than the throne of my lord King David!"* (1 Kings 1:32-37)

Solomon's rise to the throne was proclaimed so loudly that Adonijah heard the sound- and was greatly alarmed: *"Zadok the priest took the horn of oil from the sacred tent and anointed Solomon. Then they sounded the trumpet and all the people shouted, "Long live King Solomon!" And all the people went up after him, playing pipes and rejoicing greatly, so that the ground shook with the sound."* (1 Kings 1:39-40). Adonijah was fearful that Solomon would take his life for his insurrection: *"At this, all Adonijah's guests rose in alarm and dispersed. But Adonijah, in fear of Solomon, went and took hold of the horns of the altar. Then Solomon was told, "Adonijah is afraid of King Solomon and is clinging to the horns of the altar. He says, 'Let King Solomon swear to me today that he will not put his servant to death with the sword.'"*(1 Kings 1:49-51)

Davis knew his time on earth was soon to be over, so he gave a solemn charge to his son and successor, Solomon: *"I am about to go the way of all the earth," he said. "So be strong, act like a man, and observe what the Lord your God requires: Walk in obedience to him, and keep his decrees and commands, his laws and regulations, as written in the Law of Moses. Do this so that you may prosper in all you do and wherever you go and that the Lord may keep his promise to me: 'If your descendants watch how they live, and if they walk faithfully before me with all their heart and soul, you will never fail to have a successor on the throne of Israel.'* (1

Kings 2:2-4). And David had not forgotten those who had opposed him, and gave detailed instructions as to how these insults were to be dealt with. Remember "Shimei, son of Gera" that curser David? David had promised he would not harm him as long as he lived. That promise would expire on David's death: *"When he came down to meet me at the Jordan, I swore to him by the Lord: 'I will not put you to death by the sword.' But now, do not consider him innocent. You are a man of wisdom; you will know what to do to him. Bring his gray head down to the grave in blood."* (1 Kings 2:8b-9). Joab was also to be repaid for his evil deeds: *"Now you yourself know what Joab son of Zeruiah did to me—what he did to the two commanders of Israel's armies, Abner son of Ner and Amasa son of Jether. He killed them, shedding their blood in peacetime as if in battle, and with that blood he stained the belt around his waist and the sandals on his feet. Deal with him according to your wisdom, but do not let his gray head go down to the grave in peace."* (1 Kings 2:5-6). But Barzillai of Gilead, who had shown David great kindness, was to be treated with kindness: *"But show kindness to the sons of Barzillai of Gilead and let them be among those who eat at your table. They stood by me when I fled from your brother Absalom."* (1 Kings2:7). Then David finally could die in peace, knowing his line of succession had been established: *"Then David rested with his ancestors and was buried in the City of David. He had reigned forty years over Israel—seven years in Hebron and thirty-three in Jerusalem. So Solomon sat on the throne of his father David, and his rule was firmly established."* (1 Kings 2:10-12).

Solomon still had to deal with Adonijah, who had unsuccessfully tried to claim the throne. In order to save himself, Adonijah requested the hand of Abishag the Shunammite, who had comforted David before his death. This was a bold approach, but cost Adonijah his life: King Solomon answered his mother, *"Why do you request Abishag the Shunammite for Adonijah? You might as well request the kingdom for him—after all, he is my older brother—yes, for him and for Abiathar the priest and Joab son of Zeruiah!" Then King Solomon swore by the LORD: "May God deal with me, be it ever so severely, if Adonijah does not pay with his life for this request! And now, as surely as the LORD lives—he who has established me securely on the throne of my father David and has founded a dynasty for me as he promised—Adonijah shall be put to death today!" So King Solomon gave orders to Benaiah son of Jehoiada, and he struck down Adonijah and he died."* (1 Kings 2:22-25).

Joab was next: Then the king commanded Benaiah, *"Do as he says. Strike him down and bury him, and so clear me and my whole family of the guilt of the innocent blood that Joab shed. The Lord will repay him for the blood he shed, because without my father David knowing it he attacked two men and killed them with the sword. Both of them—Abner son of Ner, commander of Israel's army, and Amasa son of Jether, commander of Judah's army—were better men and more upright than he. May the guilt of their blood rest on the head of Joab and his descendants forever. But on David and his descendants, his house and his throne, may there be the Lord's peace forever." So Benaiah son of Jehoiada went up and struck down Joab and killed him, and he was buried at his home out in the country. The king put Benaiah son of Jehoiada over the army in Joab's position and replaced Abiathar with Zadok the priest."* (1 Kings 2:31-35).

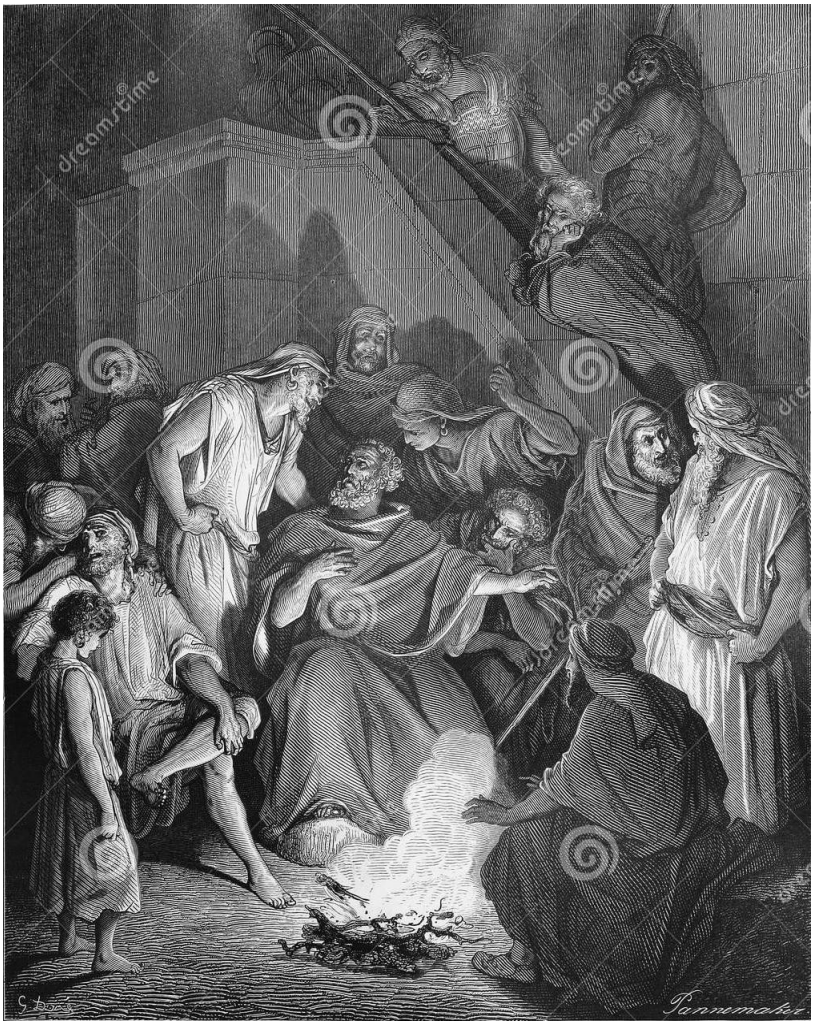
And The Shimei was dealt with: The king also said to Shimei, *"You know in your heart all the wrong you did to my father David. Now the Lord will repay you for your wrongdoing. But King Solomon will be blessed, and David's throne will remain secure before the Lord forever." Then the king gave the order to Benaiah son of Jehoiada, and he went out and struck Shimei down and he died.* (1 Kings 2:44-46). And the Scripture then concludes: *"The kingdom was now established in Solomon's hands."* (1 Kings 2:46b)

So the principle seems to have been- "death to all enemies"! But Solomon was soon to be known for more than elimination of enemies and consolidation of power- he was to establish Israel as a preeminent nation, and bring it to the zenith of its power and glory.

Luke 22:54-71

Peter had sworn- foolishly- to Jesus that he would follow Him always and would even face jail and death for Him. Now the time had come for Peter's loyalty to be tested. Peter followed his Lord as the arresting party took Jesus to the secretly convened assembly of priests, who would give Jesus a "trial" at night. Not only did Peter not have the courage to face either jail or death for his Lord, but he denied even knowing Him- not once but three times! The Scripture tells us: *A servant girl saw him seated there in the firelight. She looked closely at him and said, "This man was with him." But he denied it. "Woman, I don't know him," he said. A little later someone else saw him and said, "You also are one of them." "Man, I am not!" Peter replied. About an hour later another asserted, "Certainly this fellow was with him, for he is a Galilean."*

Peter replied, "Man, I don't know what you're talking about!" Just as he was speaking, the rooster crowed. The Lord turned and looked straight at Peter. Then Peter remembered the word the Lord had spoken to him: "Before the rooster crows today, you will disown me three times." And he went outside and wept bitterly." (Luke 22:56-62) Peter's tears were plentiful- he had lost his will and courage, just as his Lord had prophesied. How many of us, when faced with adversity, do the same?



Peter Denies Knowing Jesus Gustave Dore

Then the guards mocked Jesus. They thought they had power over Him, as did Pilate, Herod and the Sanhedrin did later in the narrative. All the power that they had was given to them by God- and only temporarily. They all had a part to play in this bitter and tragic story, and I can imagine God allowing these men and their evil hearts to pursue their desires- even if only for a brief while- so that the great Sacrifice could take place. "God in His mercy allows what He with His power could prevent!" (http://livingwordonline.tripod.com/id82.htm). It was ultimately God's mercy- to us- that the sacrifice of the Son would take place- to do for us what we could not- and would not- do for ourselves! *"The men who were guarding Jesus began mocking and beating him. 64 They blindfolded him and demanded, "Prophesy! Who hit you?" And they said many other insulting things to him."* (Luke 22:63-64).

Then the enemies of Jesus asked Him "the question". Jesus throughout His ministry had referred to Himself frequently as the "Son of Man". This was not out of modesty- a practicing religious Jew would certainly recognize this phrase as one from Ezekiel and Daniel, in which the Son of Man refers to an ordinary human, but who in Daniel 7:13 has a dimension of heavenly power and authority: *"there came*

with the clouds of the sky 'one like a son of man'" (Daniel 7:13). Jesus is asked point blank if He is the Messiah- the promised One, and his answer is in the form of a statement that echoes the accuser's own words: *"But from now on, the Son of Man will be seated at the right hand of the mighty God." They all asked, "Are you then the Son of God?" He replied, "You say that I am." Then they said, "Why do we need any more testimony? We have heard it from his own lips."* (Luke 22:69-71). The accusers finally had what they wanted- and a charge of blasphemy- which in the Law demanded a sentence of death- could now be applied to Jesus.

1 Kings 3-5 March 2, 2014 Luke 23:1-26

1 Kings 3 starts with a statement that may sound perfectly innocuous: *"Solomon made an alliance with Pharaoh king of Egypt and married his daughter."* (1 Kings 3:1a). The political value of marrying the daughter of a potential enemy is obvious. Solomon, however, was turned away for the exclusive worship of the true God by the practices of his many wives, and it led to his downfall later. Despite wealth, wisdom and vast knowledge, Solomon's departure from exclusive worship of God was a critical failure. Solomon shows an early departure from true worship by using the "high places" where sacrifices were often offered to other "gods": *"Solomon showed his love for the Lord by walking according to the instructions given him by his father David, except that he offered sacrifices and burned incense on the high places." (1 Kings 3:3). Despite this, the Lord appeared to Solomon and said "Ask for whatever you want me to give you."* (1 Kings 3:5b). God was willing to be generous and to help His people to prosper.

Solomon made an extremely good choice- he asked God for wisdom: *"Now, Lord my God, you have made your servant king in place of my father David. But I am only a little child and do not know how to carry out my duties. Your servant is here among the people you have chosen, a great people, too numerous to count or number. So give your servant a discerning heart to govern your people and to distinguish between right and wrong. For who is able to govern this great people of yours?"* (1 Kings 3:7-9). And God- generous to His people- gave Solomon what he asked for, and many things "extra" that he did not ask for- *" wealth and honor—so that in your lifetime you will have no equal among kings."* (1 Kings 3:13b). And God promised Solomon that he would have a long life if he walked "in obedience" (verse 14).

Almost immediately Solomon's wisdom is tested. Two women are presented to him with claims that "their son" was still alive, and that the other woman had unintentionally killed their child by smothering it in their sleep (1 Kings 3:16-23). Solomon gave the order- bring a sword and cut the living child in two- then both will have half a child. The story unfolds: *"The woman whose son was alive was deeply moved out of love for her son and said to the king, "Please, my lord, give her the living baby! Don't kill him!" But the other said, "Neither I nor you shall have him. Cut him in two!" Then the king gave his ruling: "Give the living baby to the first woman. Do not kill him; she is his mother." When all Israel heard the verdict the king had given, they held the king in awe, because they saw that he had wisdom from God to administer justice."* (1 Kings 3:26-28). Solomon knew the real mother would do anything to protect her child, and thus was able to select her correctly.

Solomon needed trusted advisors, priests and governors of the people, and he appoints these (1 Kings 4:1-19). It takes wisdom to know that tasks must be delegated, and that wise and trustworthy men should be selected to help Solomon rule effectively. We have seen this principle in action earlier when Moses selected "judges" to assist him in his daily activities of governing and leading his people. (Exodus 18:13-27)

The people prospered under Solomon's rule, and gladly provided Solomon provisions for his royal staff and horses and chariots: *"The people of Judah and Israel were as numerous as the sand on the seashore; they ate, they drank and they were happy. And Solomon ruled over all the kingdoms from the Euphrates River to the land of the Philistines, as far as the border of Egypt. These countries brought tribute and were Solomon's subjects all his life."* (1 Kings 4:20-21). It should be noted that chariots- though effective in battle- were very costly and "high maintenance" weapons of war (http://www.reshafim.org.il/ad/egypt/timelines/topics/chariot.htm)

God's wisdom was applied fruitfully to Solomon, he was renowned in the ancient world: *"God gave Solomon wisdom and very great insight, and a breadth of understanding as measureless as the sand on the seashore. Solomon's wisdom was greater than the wisdom of all the people of the East, and greater than all the wisdom of Egypt. He was wiser than anyone else, including Ethan the Ezrahite—wiser than Heman, Kalkol and Darda, the sons of Mahol. And his fame spread to all the surrounding nations. He spoke three thousand proverbs and his songs numbered a thousand and five. He spoke about plant life, from the cedar of Lebanon to the hyssop that grows out of walls. He also spoke about animals and birds, reptiles and fish. From all nations people came to listen to Solomon's wisdom, sent by all the kings of the world, who had heard of his wisdom."* (1 Kings 4:29-34)

Now it was time to begin building the Temple. David had plans to build the Temple, but God had advised him that this task was to be accomplished by David's son. And now Solomon communicated with the king of Tyre, King Hiram, and proposed a mutually beneficial arrangement in which Tyre would provide cedar logs and craftsmen and Solomon would in turn send food supplies to Hiram. Hiram was pleased with this arrangement, and gave God credit and glory for the wisdom and good diplomacy that Solomon exhibited in this arrangement: *"In this way Hiram kept Solomon supplied with all the cedar and juniper logs he wanted, and Solomon gave Hiram twenty thousand cors of wheat as food for his household, in addition to twenty thousand baths of pressed olive oil. Solomon continued to do this for Hiram year after year. The Lord gave Solomon wisdom, just as he had promised him. There were peaceful relations between Hiram and Solomon, and the two of them made a treaty."* (1 Kings 5:10-12). And Solomon conscripted a large work force to accomplish this enormous building task. Workers from Israel and Tyre worked together on both the timber and stone used for construction of the Temple: *"King Solomon conscripted laborers from all Israel—thirty thousand men. He sent them off to Lebanon in shifts of ten thousand a month, so that they spent one month in Lebanon and two months at home. Adoniram was in charge of the forced labor. Solomon had seventy thousand carriers and eighty thousand stonecutters in the*

hills, as well as thirty-three hundred foremen who supervised the project and directed the workers. At the king's command they removed from the quarry large blocks of high-grade stone to provide a foundation of dressed stone for the temple. The craftsmen of Solomon and Hiram and workers from Byblos cut and prepared the timber and stone for the building of the temple." (1 Kings 5:13-18).

Luke 23:1-26

Pilate then had a difficult task before him- this Jesus, who had been brought before him, was a source of controversy and was clearly hated by His enemies. But Pilate, being an honest and fair man, said: *"I find no basis for a charge against this man."* (Luke 23:4b). Once Pilate determined that Jesus was from Galilee, he gladly sent Jesus to Herod for judgment. At least for the moment, Pilate no longer was responsible for the judgment of this man. *"On hearing this, Pilate asked if the man was a Galilean. When he learned that Jesus was under Herod's jurisdiction, he sent him to Herod, who was also in Jerusalem at that time."* (Luke 23:6-7) This must have been a great relief to Pilate, and perhaps the source of some satisfaction since Herod, Pilate's political "enemy" would now have to deal with Jesus.

Herod was delighted to see Jesus. He had been fascinated with John the Baptist, and now had an opportunity to see this "miracle worker" firsthand! And an amazing thing happened*: "When Herod saw Jesus, he was greatly pleased, because for a long time he had been wanting to see him. From what he had heard about him, he hoped to see him perform a sign of some sort. He plied him with many questions, but Jesus gave him no answer. The chief priests and the teachers of the law were standing there, vehemently accusing him. Then Herod and his soldiers ridiculed and mocked him. Dressing him in an elegant robe, they sent him back to Pilate. That day Herod and Pilate became friends—before this they had been enemies."* (Luke 23:8-12) So a new friendship was formed, perhaps out of the confusion and distress of having to decide what was to become of this Jesus. Pilate then saw a way out of his difficulty- even though he saw no guilt in the accused "conspirator" and "rebel" he decide he would simply punish him and that would be the end of this troubling matter: *"You brought me this man as one who was inciting the people to rebellion. I have examined him in your presence and have found no basis for your charges against him. Neither has Herod, for he sent him back to us; as you can see, he has done nothing to deserve death. Therefore, I will punish him and then release him."* (Luke 23:14b-16).

The accusers would have no part of it- simple punishment was not enough. This "unschooled rabbi" must be executed by the state- and immediately. He was too much of a threat to their power and authority to be allowed to live and continue to gain followers. Pilate then tried to get the crowd to choose between Jesus and Barabbas- a true rebel and murderer- but the crowd insisted: *"Crucify him! Crucify him!"* (Luke 23:20b). And then Pilate tried one last time to reason with this angry crowd: For the third time he spoke to them: *"Why? What crime has this man committed? I have found in him no grounds for the death penalty. Therefore I will have him punished and then release him." But with loud shouts they insistently demanded that he be crucified, and their shouts prevailed. So Pilate decided to grant their demand. 25 He released the man who had been thrown into prison for*

insurrection and murder, the one they asked for, and surrendered Jesus to their will." (Luke 23:22-25). And now the inevitable had happened- the One who was "born to die" was about to suffer the outrageous, painful and shameful death by crucifixion. The enemy had seemingly won- yet God's plan would be fulfilled by this Great Sacrifice, and Satan would forever be defeated!

Jesus, beaten nearly to death and in shock, was so weak that He could not carry His cross- so the Roman soldiers coerced a visitor to Jerusalem-Simon from Cyrene- to help Jesus carry His cross (Luke 23:26).

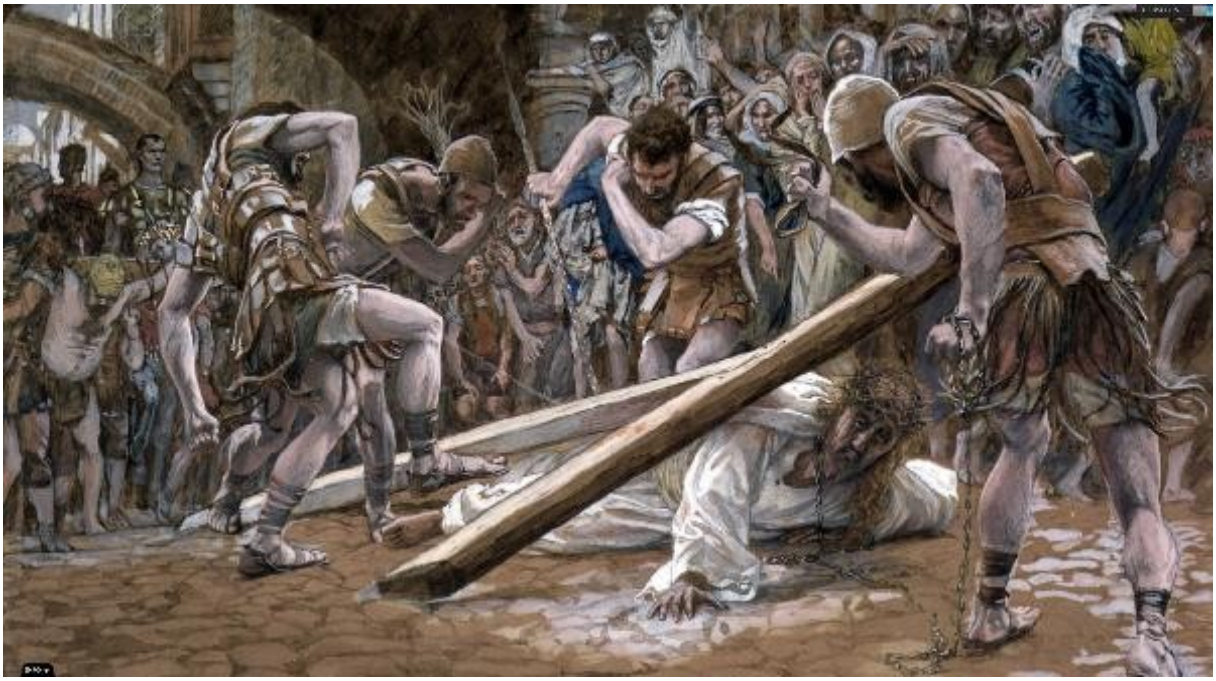


illustration for 'The Life of Christ', c.1884-96 (w/c & gouache on paperboard), Tissot, James Jacques Joseph (1836-1902) Brooklyn Museum of Art, New York, USA / The Bridgeman Art Library

1 Kings 6-7 May 3, 2014 Luke 23:27-38

Four hundred seventy years! That's how long the people had spent together since leaving slavery in Egypt. Now they had the Law- the Ark of the Covenant, and a king. And now the time had come to build a temple in Jerusalem. David had desired to build the Temple, but God told him through Nathan the prophet that his son- Solomon- was to accomplish this task. And Solomon went about building a magnificent structure: *"ninety feet long, thirty feet wide, and forty-five feet high. The porch in front of the temple's main hall was thirty feet long. It ran across the whole width of the temple and extended fifteen feet in front of the temple. He made recessed and latticed windows[b] for the temple and built side rooms against the temple walls around both the main hall and the most holy place. The lower walls were seven and a half feet wide. At the second floor the walls were nine feet wide, and at the third floor they were ten and a half feet wide. He made niches around the outside of the temple so the beams wouldn't be inserted into the temple walls. When the temple was built, they did all the stonecutting at the quarry. No*

hammers, axes, or any iron tools were heard in the temple during its construction." (1 Kings 6:2b-7)

God then made it clear to Solomon that it wasn't the structure itself that guaranteed God's presence and blessing, it was the faithful obedience of His people to the laws and regulations they had been provided: The LORD's word came to Solomon: *"Regarding this temple that you are building: If you follow my laws, enact my regulations, and keep all my commands faithfully, then I will fulfill for you my promise that I made to your father David. I will live among the Israelites. I won't abandon my people Israel."* (1 Kings 6:11-13). All totaled, it required seven years to build this magnificent structure- a place of glory and honor where the Spirit of the Lord would be pleased to dwell: *"Solomon laid the foundation of the Lord's temple in the fourth year in the month of Ziv. He finished the temple in all its details and measurements in the eleventh year during the eighth month, the month of Bul. He built it in seven years."* (1 Kings 6:37-38)

Solomon's palaces were also constructed at about the same time, a marvelous project in itself: *"Now as for Solomon's palace, it took thirteen years for him to complete its construction."* (1 Kings 7:1). The palace was built by skilled craftspeople, including Hiram of Tyre's mother, who was a widow of the tribe of Naphtali (1 Kings 7: 13). The palace was also an imposing and magnificent structure: *"He built the Forest of Lebanon Palace one hundred fifty feet in length, seventy-five feet in width, and forty-five feet in height. It had four rows of cedar columns with cedar engravings above the columns."* (1 Kings 7:2). It had bronze pillars, a "sea" of bronze, ten bronze stands and ten wash basins (1 Kings 7:15-39). The "equipment" was all made of polished bronze, but the utensils and other objects used in the temple were fashioned from precious metals: *"All the equipment that Hiram made for King Solomon for the Lord's temple was made from polished bronze. The king cast it in clay molds in the Jordan Valley between Succoth and Zarethan. Due to the very large number of objects, Solomon didn't even try to weigh the bronze. Solomon also made all the equipment for the Lord's temple: the gold altar; the gold table for the bread of the presence; the lampstands of pure gold, five on the right and five on the left in front of the inner sanctuary; the flowers, the lamps, and the tongs of gold; the cups, wick trimmers, bowls, ladles, and censers of pure gold; and the gold sockets for the doors to the most holy place and for the doors to the main hall. When all King Solomon's work on the Lord's temple was finished, he brought the silver, gold, and all the objects his father David had dedicated and put them in the treasuries of the Lord's temple."* (1 Kings 7:45b-51).

There are always those who feel that simplicity is the greatest virtue in building places of worship. They argue, among other things, that the funds used for the construction of such magnificent buildings and furnishings could be better used to benefit the poor, homeless and otherwise needy. Judas himself made this argument when Jesus was anointed with "expensive perfume" by a grateful follower, stating that the money should have been used (Matthew 26:9). There is a compelling case to be made that a magnificent church, replete with stained glass polished wood and extravagant furnishings is a symbol of the glory and honor of God. Perhaps we shall never settle this dispute until we worship in the New Heaven (Rev. 21).

Model of Solomon's Temple

Luke 23:27-38

The women, presumable followers and lovers of Jesus, witnessed and mourned His crucifixion. They could not understand how this One who had healed, taught, loved and made such a positive impact on the people as Leader and Friend was now being led to his gruesome and painful death. And so they: "mourned and wailed for him." (Luke 23:27b). Then Jesus said to them: *"Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me; weep for yourselves and for your children. 29 For the time will come when you will say, 'Blessed are the childless women, the wombs that never bore and the breasts that never nursed!' Then*
"'they will say to the mountains, "Fall on us!"
and to the hills, "Cover us!"'
For if people do these things when the tree is green, what will happen when it is dry?" (Luke 23:28b-31). What would they do? There was-and is- almost no limit to the evil man can do. One of the most touching and beautiful tributes to this saying of Jesus was a song I first heard from Peter, Paul and Mary in the 1960's "Green Wood". The lyrics are, in part:

If we don't stop there'll come a time when women
With barren womb will bitterly rejoice
With breasts that dry and never fill with promise
Gladly they'll not suckle one more life

Is this then the whimper and the ending?
The impotence of people raised on fear
A fear that blinds the sense of common oneness
Common love and life or death are here

If we do these things in the greenwood
What will happen in the dry? (Peter Yarrow)

And so they crucified the Lord of all- between two criminals. And Jesus said from the cross:
"Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing." And they divided up his clothes by casting lots." (Luke 23:34). The enemies of Jesus mocked Him, and the "leaders" sneered: *"He saved others; let him save himself if he is God's Messiah, the Chosen One."* (Luke 23:35b). And the soldiers mocked Him: *"They offered him wine vinegar and said, "If you are the king of the Jews, save yourself."* (Luke 23:36b-37). And the sign which Pilate ordered put above Him said *"This is the King of the Jews"* (Luke 23:38). They mocked Him, tormented Him, beat Him nearly to death and put terrible spikes through His wrists and feet to execute Him by suffocation. This was the most cruel way to kill a condemned person- and God turned the instrument of torture and shame into a symbol of love, forgiveness and reconciliation- His Name be praised!

1 Kings 8-9 May 4, 2014 Luke 23:39-56

Now it was time for the ark to be brought into the Temple, and the dedication of the Temple initiated. The ark was to rest in the inner chamber, the "holy of holies". So Solomon summoned the key leadership of the people: *"Then King Solomon summoned into his presence at Jerusalem the elders of Israel, all the heads of the tribes and the chiefs of the Israelite families, to bring up the ark of the LORD's covenant from Zion, the City of David. All the Israelites came together to King Solomon at the time of the festival in the month of Ethanim, the seventh month."* (1 Kings 8:1-2) The ark was then put into its special, reserved place*: "The priests then brought the ark of the Lord's covenant to its place in the inner sanctuary of the temple, the Most Holy Place, and put it beneath the wings of the cherubim. The cherubim spread their wings over the place of the ark and overshadowed the ark and its carrying poles."* (1 Kings 8:6-7). Then a truly amazing thing happened- the Glory of God filled the Temple! The Scripture says: *"When the priests withdrew from the Holy Place, the cloud filled the temple of the Lord. And the priests could not perform their service because of the cloud, for the glory of the Lord filled his temple. Then Solomon said, "The Lord has said that he would dwell in a dark cloud; I have indeed built a magnificent temple for you, a place for you to dwell forever."* (1 Kings 8:10-13).

Solomon then offers a beautiful prayer of dedication (1 Kings 8:23-53). A massive sacrifice was made, followed by fourteen days of celebration (1 Kings 8:65-66). So everything was in place for Israel's success, power and glory. All the people and the king needed to do was follow God- and Him only. Sounds simple, but it was never truly achieved. God promised them His presence and that the throne of David would persevere, but the people were disobedient and rebellious. Only when Jesus came could there be an answer to this "built-in rebellion"!

God then answers Solomon's prayer, and in a very long response says*: "I have heard the prayer and plea you have made before me; I have consecrated this temple, which you have built, by putting my Name there forever. My eyes and my*

heart will always be there. "As for you, if you walk before me faithfully with integrity of heart and uprightness, as David your father did, and do all I command and observe my decrees and laws, I will establish your royal throne over Israel forever, as I promised David your father when I said, 'You shall never fail to have a successor on the throne of Israel.' "But if you[a] or your descendants turn away from me and do not observe the commands and decrees I have given you[b] and go off to serve other gods and worship them, then I will cut off Israel from the land I have given them and will reject this temple I have consecrated for my Name. Israel will then become a byword and an object of ridicule among all peoples. This temple will become a heap of rubble. All who pass by will be appalled and will scoff and say, 'Why has the Lord done such a thing to this land and to this temple?' People will answer, 'Because they have forsaken the Lord their God, who brought their ancestors out of Egypt, and have embraced other gods, worshiping and serving them—that is why the Lord brought all this disaster on them.'" (1 Kings 9:3b-9). As always, God deals with His people on an "if-then" basis- if they are obedient and worship Him only – prosperity and success; if not- God would allow them to be punished- He would *"cut off Israel from the land"* (verse 7). The choice was clear- the obedience only partial and occasional. This was the unfortunate continuing story of God and His people throughout the Old Testament.

Then we see a description of some of Solomon's "other activities". Solomon gave twenty cities to Hiram king of Tyre: *"King Solomon gave twenty towns in Galilee to Hiram king of Tyre, because Hiram had supplied him with all the cedar and juniper and gold he wanted. But when Hiram went from Tyre to see the towns that Solomon had given him, he was not pleased with them. "What kind of towns are these you have given me, my brother?" he asked. And he called them the Land of Kabul, a name they have to this day."* (1 Kings 9:11-13). Didn't Solomon know that Hiram would not be pleased with this gift? Surely this was a poor way to reward a friend of Israel!

Solomon also set up "terraces" for his Egyptian wife, a hint at how he would be misled and diverted from the worship of the True God later. (1 Kings 9:24). And very interestingly (I almost never think of an Israeli navy!), Solomon built ships and used them to project power and influence in both the Red (Reed) Sea and the Mediterranean (1 Kings 9:26-28)

Luke 23:39-56

Jesus' identity was questioned by many during His ministry, and one of the last to do so on this earth was one of the criminals crucified with Him: *"Aren't you the Messiah? Save yourself and us!"* (Luke 23:39b). Notice that the criminal had an interest in Jesus being who He said he was- so that the criminal himself could be saved! The other, who seemed to be more aware of his own sin, said: *"Don't you fear God," he said, "since you are under the same sentence? We are punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve. But this man has done nothing wrong." Then he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom."* (Luke 23:40b-42). The Jesus made a promise that surprised the criminal, and surprises even us today: Jesus answered him, *"Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise."* (Luke 23:43). Imagine that! In one day, the condemned criminal-

deserving (in his own words) the most terrible punishment imaginable is soon to walk with Jesus in the Heaven that he did not deserve, but that Jesus had made available to him. He was the very first of many of us to experience the awesome power of the forgiveness of God. This God, "rich in mercy" (Ephesians 2:4), saved the criminal, and offers salvation to us.

Then the final act of obedience- Jesus commits His spirit to His Heavenly Father- and rejoins Him at the right hand. *"Father, into your hands I commit my spirit." When he had said this, he breathed his last."* (Luke 23:46b). And the temple curtain was torn, darkness filled the skies, and a centurion praised God! (Luke 23:44-47). And those who loved Him watched from a distance. The Joseph of Arimethea, probably a follower of Jesus, asked Pilate for the body to be buried properly. It was the preparation day for the Sabbath (Luke 23:50-54). Jesus' body was wrapped in a burial cloth and placed in a tomb that Joseph owned. And the women- still faithful- made their preparations for a proper burial, but were careful to observe the Sabbath. They would wait until the first day of the week to attend to Jesus: *"The women who had come with Jesus from Galilee followed Joseph and saw the tomb and how his body was laid in it. 56 Then they went home and prepared spices and perfumes. But they rested on the Sabbath in obedience to the commandment."* (Luke 23:55-56).

1 Kings 10-11 May 5, 2014 Luke 24:1-35

Solomon's fame had spread far and wide. The Queen of Sheba, having hears about Solomon's wisdom and extensive knowledge, wished to see him for herself and test him with "hard questions". She was duly impressed: *"Arriving at Jerusalem with a very great caravan—with camels carrying spices, large quantities of gold, and precious stones—she came to Solomon and talked with him about all that she had on her mind. Solomon answered all her questions; nothing was too hard for the king to explain to her. When the queen of Sheba saw all the wisdom of Solomon and the palace he had built, the food on his table, the seating of his officials, the attending servants in their robes, his cupbearers, and the burnt offerings he made at[a] the temple of the Lord, she was overwhelmed. She said to the king, "The report I heard in my own country about your achievements and your wisdom is true. But I did not believe these things until I came and saw with my own eyes. Indeed, not even half was told me; in wisdom and wealth you have far exceeded the report I heard. How happy your people must be! How happy your officials, who continually stand before*

you and hear your wisdom! Praise be to the Lord your God, who has delighted in you and placed you on the throne of Israel. Because of the Lord's eternal love for Israel, he has made you king to maintain justice and righteousness." And she gave the king 120 talents of gold, large quantities of spices, and precious stones. Never again were so many spices brought in as those the queen of Sheba gave to King Solomon." (1 Kings 10:2-10). Nothing was "too hard" for Solomon to answer, and the witness that he made to his own people and the world must have been pleasing to God. Israel was fulfilling its commission to be a "light to the world" and a "light to the Gentiles" (Isaiah 49:6). And Solomon was very generous to the queen: *"King Solomon gave the queen of Sheba all she desired and asked for, besides what he had given her out of his royal bounty. Then she left and returned with her retinue to her own country."* (1 Kings 10:13).

Solomon was rich not only in gold and material possessions, but also in wisdom. The Provers are attributed to him, as well as the Song of Solomon. Some also credit Solomon for the authorship of the book of Ecclesiastes. (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ecclesiastes see also http://voices.yahoo.com/who-really-wrote-ecclesiastes-3694932.html) The Scripture describes it this way: *"King Solomon was greater in riches and wisdom than all the other kings of the earth. The whole world sought audience with Solomon to hear the wisdom God had put in his heart. Year after year, everyone who came brought a gift—articles of silver and gold, robes, weapons and spices, and horses and mules."* (1 Kings 10:23-25).

Solomon's downfall, and the subsequent downfall of the united Kingdom, was attributed by Scripture to his entanglements in the religions of his many wives: *"King Solomon, however, loved many foreign women besides Pharaoh's daughter—Moabites, Ammonites, Edomites, Sidonians and Hittites. They were from nations about which the Lord had told the Israelites, "You must not intermarry with them, because they will surely turn your hearts after their gods." Nevertheless, Solomon held fast to them in love. He had seven hundred wives of royal birth and three hundred concubines, and his wives led him astray. As Solomon grew old, his wives turned his heart after other gods, and his heart was not fully devoted to the Lord his God, as the heart of David his father had been."* (1 Kings 11:1-4) And when Solomon's heart was turned "after other gods", the blessings of the Lord ceased. God told Solomon: *"Since this is your attitude and you have not kept my covenant and my decrees, which I commanded you, I will most certainly tear the kingdom away from you and give it to one of your subordinates. Nevertheless, for the sake of David your father, I will not do it during your lifetime. I will tear it out of the hand of your son. Yet I will not tear the whole kingdom from him, but will give him one tribe for the sake of David my servant and for the sake of Jerusalem, which I have chosen."* (1 Kings 11:11b-14)

As if to illustrate His displeasure with Solomon, God raised up an adversary to Solomon- Hadad the Edomite. Hadad had escaped when David and Joab had "struck down all the men of Edom" (1 Kings 11:15b). But Hadad escaped, and was given a house and land and protection by the Egyptian Pharaoh (1 Kings 11:17-18). Pharaoh was so pleased with Hadad that he: *"gave him a sister of his own wife, Queen Tahpenes, in marriage."* (1 Kings 11:19b). When Hadad found out that both

David and Joab were dead, he asked the Pharaoh's permission to return to Israel, where he became an adversary to Solomon (1 Kings 11:21-22). Another adversary, "Rezon son of Eliada" (1 Kings 11:23). The Scripture tells us that: *"Rezon was Israel's adversary as long as Solomon lived, adding to the trouble caused by Hadad. So Rezon ruled in Aram and was hostile toward Israel."* (1 Kings 11:25). And finally, Jereboam rose up in opposition to Solomon: *"Also, Jeroboam son of Nebat rebelled against the king. He was one of Solomon's officials, an Ephraimite from Zeredah, and his mother was a widow named Zeruah."* (1 Kings 11:26). He eventually acquired control of ten of the twelve tribes, God having promised and left one tribe for Solomon. God told Jereboam: *'See, I am going to tear the kingdom out of Solomon's hand and give you ten tribes. But for the sake of my servant David and the city of Jerusalem, which I have chosen out of all the tribes of Israel, he will have one tribe. I will do this because they have[m] forsaken me and worshiped Ashtoreth the goddess of the Sidonians, Chemosh the god of the Moabites, and Molek the god of the Ammonites, and have not walked in obedience to me, nor done what is right in my eyes, nor kept my decrees and laws as David, Solomon's father, did."* (1 Kings 11:31b-33).

And Solomon tried to eliminate Jereboam, but he fled to Egypt (there seems to be a trend here- get in trouble with the king- go to Egypt): *"Solomon tried to kill Jeroboam, but Jeroboam fled to Egypt, to Shishak the king, and stayed there until Solomon's death."* (1 Kings 11:40). And Solomon ruled 40 years in Israel. One has to wonder what the course of history in Israel, and of Solomon's life in particular, that might have been radically different if Solomon had only obeyed God. But Solomon apparently wanted "many wives"- either to validate himself or show his power and influence- and great wealth. The end of Solomon's life was a pale shadow of what might have been if he had only been obedient! The Scripture summarizes Solomon's reign this way: *"As for the other events of Solomon's reign—all he did and the wisdom he displayed—are they not written in the book of the annals of Solomon? Solomon reigned in Jerusalem over all Israel forty years. Then he rested with his ancestors and was buried in the city of David his father. And Rehoboam his son succeeded him as king."* (1 Kings 11:41-43). The "Book of the Annals of Solomon" is a lost reference (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Non-canonical_books_referenced_in_the_Bible)

Luke 24:1-35

Jesus has risen! The women were the first to witness the empty tomb, as they journeyed there to take spices to prepare Jesus' body for proper burial. Two angels, brilliant white, told them the wonderful news: *"While they were wondering about this, suddenly two men in clothes that gleamed like lightning stood beside them. In their fright the women bowed down with their faces to the ground, but the men said to them, "Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here; he has risen! Remember how he told you, while he was still with you in Galilee: 'The Son of Man must be delivered over to the hands of sinners, be crucified and on the third day be raised again.' " Then they remembered his words."* (Luke 24:4-8). So they hurried back to the Eleven (minus Judas of course) and were not believed. Peter decide to go "see for himself", and then: "*got up and ran to the tomb. Bending over,*

he saw the strips of linen lying by themselves, and he went away, wondering to himself what had happened." (Luke 24:12b).

On the "same day" two disciples were traveling on the road to Emmaus. Then the remarkable story unfolds: *"They were talking with each other about everything that had happened. As they talked and discussed these things with each other, Jesus himself came up and walked along with them; but they were kept from recognizing him. He asked them, "What are you discussing together as you walk along?" They stood still, their faces downcast. One of them, named Cleopas, asked him, "Are you the only one visiting Jerusalem who does not know the things that have happened there in these days?" "What things?" he asked. "About Jesus of Nazareth," they replied. "He was a prophet, powerful in word and deed before God and all the people. The chief priests and our rulers handed him over to be sentenced to death, and they crucified him; but we had hoped that he was the one who was going to redeem Israel. And what is more, it is the third day since all this took place. In addition, some of our women amazed us. They went to the tomb early this morning but didn't find his body. They came and told us that they had seen a vision of angels, who said he was alive. Then some of our companions went to the tomb and found it just as the women had said, but they did not see Jesus." He said to them, "How foolish you are, and how slow to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Did not the Messiah have to suffer these things and then enter his glory?" And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself."* (Luke 24:14-27). It is fascinating to me that Jesus was not recognized by these two travelers. Surely they knew what Jesus looked like! Were they so sure that this "mystery traveler" was someone else that they failed to see Him? Or did Jesus have a different type of body- a resurrection body- that looked "different" than his earthly body? After all, Mary failed to recognize the resurrected Jesus in the garden (John 20:1-16). We only have wonderful hints and a partial answer, but it is clear that something very different from our "earthly bodies" is referenced here.

Finally, during the "breaking of bread" together, the two disciples recognized Jesus: *"When he was at the table with them, he took bread, gave thanks, broke it and began to give it to them. Then their eyes were opened and they recognized him, and he disappeared from their sight. They asked each other, "Were not our hearts burning within us while he talked with us on the road and opened the Scriptures to us?" They got up and returned at once to Jerusalem. There they found the Eleven and those with them, assembled together and saying, "It is true! The Lord has risen and has appeared to Simon." Then the two told what had happened on the way, and how Jesus was recognized by them when he broke the bread."* (Luke 24:30-35). And so Jesus appears- to the women, and then to the two travelers on the road to Emmaus. He would soon appear to many others, and leave final instructions for those who loved Him.

1 Kings 12-13 May 6, 2014 Luke 24:36-53

So Rehoboam had a wonderful opportunity to build on what Solomon had established- but he took some very bad advice. The advice from the “elders” was to be a benevolent king, and to think of the needs of the people- the adice of the “young men” was to treat the people harshly and demand even more of them. Rehoboam took the “bad advice” of the young men, and potentially lost an opportunity to further the glory of Israel. (1 Kings 12:1-14). However, it seems that this tuen of events was a fulfilment of prophesy given earlier: “So the king did not listen to the people, for this turn of events was from the Lord, to fulfill the word the Lord had spoken to Jeroboam son of Nebat through Ahijah the Shilonite.” (1 Kings 12:15). And ten of the tribes rejected Rehoboam, leaven the way open for Jeroboam to rule.

Rehoboam did another foolish thing- he sent Adoniram to the ten rebelling tribes, presumably to convince them to return to “the fold”. But the people would have none of it: “King Rehoboam sent out Adoniram,[b] who was in charge of forced labor, but all Israel stoned him to death. King Rehoboam, however, managed to get into his chariot and escape to Jerusalem. 19 So Israel has been in rebellion against the house of David to this day.” (1 Kings 12:18-19). Then Rehoboam mustered men from Judah to go to war against the rest of Israel:” When all the Israelites heard that Jeroboam had returned, they sent and called him to the assembly and made him king over all Israel. Only the tribe of Judah remained loyal to the house of David. 21 When Rehoboam arrived in Jerusalem, he mustered all Judah and the tribe of Benjamin—a hundred and eighty thousand able young men—to go to war against Israel and to regain the kingdom for Rehoboam son of Solomon.” (1 Kings 12:10-21). But the Word of God came to “Shemiah the man of God” (1 Kings 12:22b) and the armies were told to return to their homes, averting a war within Israel.

The- amazingly- golden calves return to Israel. The golden calf in Exodus was a snare to many, and an idol that outrages both Moses and God. But this time there were two-one in Dan and one in Bethel. These were placed there by Jereboam to prevent the people from visiting Jerusalem and possible pledging their allegiance to

Rehoboam: “After seeking advice, the king made two golden calves. He said to the people, “It is too much for you to go up to Jerusalem. Here are your gods, Israel, who brought you up out of Egypt.” 29 One he set up in Bethel, and the other in Dan. 30 And this thing became a sin; the people came to worship the one at Bethel and went as far as Dan to worship the other.” (1 Kings 12:28-30). Jereboam showed his total lack of devotion t god, and his affinity for worship at “high places” by instituting a new system of sacrifices: Jeroboam built shrines on high places and appointed priests from all sorts of people, even though they were not Levites. 32 He instituted a festival on the fifteenth day of the eighth month, like the festival held in Judah, and offered sacrifices on the altar. This he did in Bethel, sacrificing to the calves he had made. And at Bethel he also installed priests at the high places he had made. 33 On the fifteenth day of the eighth month, a month of his own choosing, he offered sacrifices on the altar he had built at Bethel. So he instituted the festival for the Israelites and went up to the altar to make offerings. (1 Kings 12:31-33).

God would soon show his displeasure with these “sacrifices” and with Jereboam by sending: “a man of God came from Judah to Bethel, as Jeroboam was standing by the altar to make an offering.” (1 Kings 13:1b). This man of God prophesied that “human bones” would be sacrificed on the “false altar”, a prophesy that Jereboam correctly perceived as judgment from God. When he tried to intercede and have the man of God seized, Jereboam’s outsretched hand was shriveled. His hand was only restored after the man of God prayed for healing. When Jereboam tried to make the peace with this man by offering him a meal, the man of God refuses, saying: “Even if you were to give me half your possessions, I would not go with you, nor would I eat bread or drink water here. 9 For I was commanded by the word of the Lord: ‘You must not eat bread or drink water or return by the way you came.’” 10 So he took another road and did not return by the way he had come to Bethel.” (1 Kings 13:8b-10). A “certain old prophet” got the younger man of God to break his rule about eating during his prophetic mission: So the prophet said to him, “Come home with me and eat.” 16 The man of God said, “I cannot turn back and go with you, nor can I eat bread or drink water with you in this place. 17 I have been told by the word of the Lord: ‘You must not eat bread or drink water there or return by the way you came.’” 18 The old prophet answered, “I too am a prophet, as you are. And an angel said to me by the word of the Lord: ‘Bring him back with you to your house so that he may eat bread and drink water.’” (But he was lying to him.) 19 So the man of God returned with him and ate and drank in his house, and he was killed by a wild beast along the road. (1 Kings 13:24). The older prophet clearly saw this as an act of God, but decided to recover the younger man’s body and have it buried properly, and asked that his bones be buried next to the “man of God’s”. (1 Kings 13:27-32).

Jereboam seemed set in his evil ways, as the Scripture tells us: “Even after this, Jeroboam did not change his evil ways, but once more appointed priests for the high places from all sorts of people. Anyone who wanted to become a priest he consecrated for the high places. 34 This was the sin of the house of Jeroboam that led to its downfall and to its destruction from the face of the earth.” (1 Kings 13:33-34)

Luke 24:36-53

The disciples were still talking about the appearance of Jesus on the road to Emmaus when He suddenly appeared to them. Jesus both greeted and calmed them by saying: “Peace be with you.” (Luke 24:36b). This greeting is still used by the church today. Jesus then went on to give them words of encouragement and power: “Why are you troubled, and why do doubts rise in your minds? 39 Look at my hands and my feet. It is I myself! Touch me and see; a ghost does not have flesh and bones, as you see I have.” 40 When he had said this, he showed them his hands and feet. 41 And while they still did not believe it because of joy and amazement, he asked them, “Do you have anything here to eat?” 42 They gave him a piece of broiled fish, 43 and he took it and ate it in their presence. 44 He said to them, “This is what I told you while I was still with you: Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms.” (Luke 24:38b-44). I have always been strangely comforted that Jesus, in His resurrection body, ate fish! Looks like there may be fish fries in the Kingdom!

Then, just as He had done with Cleopas and his companion on the road to Emmaus, he “opened their minds” to the meaning of the Scriptures regarding Him, and told them to wait for the Holy Spirit’s power which would soon come to them: Then he opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures. 46 He told them, “This is what is written: The Messiah will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, 47 and repentance for the forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem. 48 You are witnesses of these things. 49 I am going to send you what my Father has promised; but stay in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high.” (Luke 24:45-49).

And then He left them, raising His hands to bless them, and they were filled with joy and praised God. What a transition from the gloomy depressing time they had experience to the amazing and incomprehensible joy of His victory- and their victory- over death and sin!

1 Kings 14-15 May 7, 2014 John 1:1-28

Jereboam’s son Abijah became ill, so Jereboam concocted a plan to have his wife disguise herself and visit the prophet Ahijah. It seems a little odd that she would go to the trouble of disguising herself since Ahijah was blind due to age, but she did nonetheless. It is likely that Ahijah could recognize her voice if he had ever heard it, since in many cases the blind have other senses heightened. God circumvented this plan, and told Ahijah that Jereboam’s wife would visit him and claim to be someone else. *“So when Ahijah heard the sound of her footsteps at the door, he said, “Come in, wife of Jeroboam. Why this pretense? I have been sent to you with bad news. Go, tell Jeroboam that this is what the Lord, the God of Israel, says: ‘I raised you up from among the people and appointed you ruler over my people Israel. I tore the kingdom away from the house of David and gave it to you, but you have not been like my servant David, who kept my commands and followed me with all his heart, doing only what was right in my eyes. You have done more evil than all who lived before you. You have made for yourself other gods, idols made of metal; you have aroused my anger and turned your back on me. “‘Because of this, I am going to bring disaster on the house of Jeroboam. I will cut off from Jeroboam*

every last male in Israel—slave or free. I will burn up the house of Jeroboam as one burns dung, until it is all gone. Dogs will eat those belonging to Jeroboam who die in the city, and the birds will feed on those who die in the country. The Lord has spoken!' (1 Kings 14:6-11) As the story continues, everything Ahijah said came true*: "As for you, go back home. When you set foot in your city, the boy will die. All Israel will mourn for him and bury him. He is the only one belonging to Jeroboam who will be buried, because he is the only one in the house of Jeroboam in whom the Lord, the God of Israel, has found anything good. "The Lord will raise up for himself a king over Israel who will cut off the family of Jeroboam. Even now this is beginning to happen. And the Lord will strike Israel, so that it will be like a reed swaying in the water. He will uproot Israel from this good land that he gave to their ancestors and scatter them beyond the Euphrates River, because they aroused the Lord's anger by making Asherah poles. And he will give Israel up because of the sins Jeroboam has committed and has caused Israel to commit." Then Jeroboam's wife got up and left and went to Tirzah. As soon as she stepped over the threshold of the house, the boy died."* (1 Kings 14:12-17). So God finally punished Jereboam for all his rebelliousness and evil.

Rehoboam was king in Judah, and Judah committed great evil during his reign. They worshipped other gods, made sacrifices in high places, and even had male shrine prostitutes. The Scripture says they committed: *"all the detestable practices of the nations the Lord had driven out before the Israelites."* (1 Kings 14:24b). As an answer to Rehoboam's evil and lack of true commitment to God, the Egyptian king Shishak attacked Jerusalem and carried of almost all the treasures in the Temple. Rehoboam then replaced the gold shields with bronze ones, symbolic of the state into which Judah had grown- accepting the counterfeit instead of the purity and quality of the real thing- true worship of God (1 Kings 14:25-28). Rehoboam reigned a total of 17 years, after which his son Abijah succeeded him (1 Kings 14:21,29).

Abijah's reign only lasted three years. He was in constant battles with Jereboam during that time. His lack of success as ruler of Judah is directly attributable to his lack of faith and obedience: *"He committed all the sins his father had done before him; his heart was not fully devoted to the Lord his God, as the heart of David his forefather had been. Nevertheless, for David's sake the Lord his God gave him a lamp in Jerusalem by raising up a son to succeed him and by making Jerusalem strong. For David had done what was right in the eyes of the Lord and had not failed to keep any of the Lord's commands all the days of his life—except in the case of Uriah the Hittite. There was war between Abijah and Jeroboam throughout Abijah's lifetime."* (1 Kings 15:3-6).

Asa then succeeded Abijah as king of Judah. His reign lasted forty one years. His reign was relatively long, mostly because Asa loved the Lord and was consistent in his faith: *"Asa did what was right in the eyes of the Lord, as his father David had done. He expelled the male shrine prostitutes from the land and got rid of all the idols his ancestors had made. He even deposed his grandmother Maakah from her position as queen mother, because she had made a repulsive image for the worship of Asherah. Asa cut it down and burned it in the Kidron Valley. Although he did not remove the high places, Asa's heart was fully committed to the Lord all his life. He brought into the temple of the Lord the silver and gold and the articles that he and his father had dedicated."* (1 Kings 15: 11-15) During a war between Asa and Baasha king of Israel, Baasha fortified Ramah so that entry and exit to Judah would

be restricted. Asa later entered into a treaty with the king of Abram, using the silver and gold to cement a treaty between Judah and Ben Hadad, king of Aram. He attacked Israel, forcing Baasha to withdraw from Ramah, effectively ending the threat to Judah.

In Israel, there was turmoil and intrigue at the top, as Nadal was killed by Baasha, overthrowing his reign. The Scripture describes it this way: *"Nadab son of Jeroboam became king of Israel in the second year of Asa king of Judah, and he reigned over Israel two years. He did evil in the eyes of the Lord, following the ways of his father and committing the same sin his father had caused Israel to commit. Baasha son of Ahijah from the tribe of Issachar plotted against him, and he struck him down at Gibbethon, a Philistine town, while Nadab and all Israel were besieging it. Baasha killed Nadab in the third year of Asa king of Judah and succeeded him as king."* (1 Kings 15:25-28). Baasha was no less evil than any of his predecessors- in fact, in the entire history of Israel there were only "good kings" in Judah- never in Israel. This may have been less about Jereboam's DNA than his example of evil. The description of Baasha goes like this: *"He did evil in the eyes of the Lord, following the ways of Jeroboam and committing the same sin Jeroboam had caused Israel to commit."* (1 Kings 25:34). The refrain "he did evil in the eyes of the Lord" is heard over and over in Israel.

John 1:1-28

John's gospel is a radical departure from the synoptic gospels. Instead of being concerned as much as to the genealogy or historic details of Jesus' birth and young manhood, John instead focuses on the spiritual dimensions of Jesus' life and ministry. No details of the Advent are presented, instead a statement is made about the nature of God and His gift of a Son to the world- a Son who was with God from the beginning, and was the true source of light and knowledge: *"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it."* (John 1:1-5).

The attention then turns to John the Baptists. He was not, as John explains, the "true light" but was brought into being to "bear witness" to the light (John 1:6-8). Then John bears witness to the amazing gift that God has made possible, and the promise inherent in the coming of His Son: *"The true light that gives light to everyone was coming into the world. He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him. He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him. Yet to all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God—children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God. The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth."* (John 1:9-14)

Naturally the Jewish leaders were anxious about anyone who might generate a following, and especially one who seemed to be a prophet. They questions John and asked him what his role and purpose was: *Now this was John's testimony when the Jewish leaders[c] in Jerusalem sent priests and Levites to ask him who he was. He did not fail to confess, but confessed freely, "I am not the Messiah." They asked him, "Then who are you? Are you Elijah?" He said, "I am not." "Are you the Prophet?" He answered, "No." Finally they said, "Who are you? Give us an answer to take back to those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?" John replied in the words of Isaiah the prophet, "I am the voice of one calling in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way for the Lord.'" Now the Pharisees who had been sent questioned him, "Why then do you baptize if you are not the Messiah, nor Elijah, nor the Prophet?" "I baptize with water," John replied, "but among you stands one you do not know. He is the one who comes after me, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie." This all happened at Bethany on the other side of the Jordan, where John was baptizing."* (John 1:19-28). Notice that John clearly identifies himself as a messenger. The Message translation is particularly useful here, where John claims he is a "stagehand" and not the main act: "*But John intervened: "I'm baptizing you here in the river. The main character in this drama, to whom I'm a mere stagehand, will ignite the kingdom life, a fire, the Holy Spirit within you, changing you from the inside out."* (Luke 3:16- The Message)

1 Kings 16-18 May 8, 2014 John 1:29-51

Evil kings in Israel- a legacy and a grim procession of kings who did "evil in the eyes of the Lord" Not a single king in Israel was regarded by Scripture as one who did "good in the eyes of the Lord". Sometimes things in Israel literally went from bad to worse. 1 Kings 16-18 chronicles the "rogues gallery" of such kings. The first mentioned is Baasha. He was told by the prophet Jehu son of Hanani that: *"Dogs will eat those belonging to Baasha who die in the city, and birds will feed on those who die in the country."* (1 Kings 16;4) Next was Elah, who was struck down and killed by Zimri: *Zimri, one of his officials, who had command of half his chariots, plotted against him. Elah was in Tirzah at the time, getting drunk in the home of Arza, the palace administrator at Tirzah. Zimri came in, struck him down and killed him in the twenty-seventh year of Asa king of Judah. Then he succeeded him as king. As soon as he began to reign and was seated on the throne, he killed off Baasha's whole family. He did not spare a single male, whether relative or friend. So Zimri destroyed the whole family of Baasha, in accordance with the word of the Lord spoken against Baasha through the prophet Jehu— because of all the sins Baasha and his son Elah had committed and had caused Israel to commit, so that they aroused the anger of the Lord, the God of Israel, by their worthless idols."* (1 Kings 16:9-13) Notice that Zimri not only killed Elah, but all of Baasha's family, fulfilling the prophesy against him uttered by Jehu. The simple reason given for this slaughter is "the sins Baasha and his son Elah had committed". God was clearly not pleased with these activities and turning to idols- prohibited by the first and second commandments!

Zimri, pretender to the throne, only lasted as king for "seven days" (1 Kings 16:15). He was quickly eliminated by the army of Israel, who chose their leader Omri to be the next king: "When the Israelites in the camp heard that Zimri had plotted against

the king and murdered him, they proclaimed Omri, the commander of the army, king over Israel that very day there in the camp. 17 Then Omri and all the Israelites with him withdrew from Gibbethon and laid siege to Tirzah. 18 When Zimri saw that the city was taken, he went into the citadel of the royal palace and set the palace on fire around him. So he died, 19 because of the sins he had committed, doing evil in the eyes of the Lord and following the ways of Jeroboam and committing the same sin Jeroboam had caused Israel to commit." (1 Kings 16:16-19) The pattern is by now very familiar- the king was eliminated becase of "the sins he had committed", which in this case included murder of the drunken king Elah.

Omri was no better that his predecessors, during his twelve year reign: *"But Omri did evil in the eyes of the Lord and sinned more than all those before him. He followed completely the ways of Jeroboam son of Nebat, committing the same sin Jeroboam had caused Israel to commit, so that they aroused the anger of the Lord, the God of Israel, by their worthless idols."* (1 Kings 16:25-26). Omri followed "the ways of Jereboam"- clearly evil and repulsive to God. Then we find Ahad, Omri's son, as the next king. The line of descent, so filled with evil, had yet to reach its deplorable pinnacle. Ahab was described as the worst of all the kings of Israel at that time, the "worst" was literally "saved for last". The Scripture tells us: "Ahab son of Omri did more evil in the eyes of the Lord than any of those before him. 31 He not only considered it trivial to commit the sins of Jeroboam son of Nebat, but he also married Jezebel daughter of Ethbaal king of the Sidonians, and began to serve Baal and worship him. 32 He set up an altar for Baal in the temple of Baal that he built in Samaria. 33 Ahab also made an Asherah pole and did more to arouse the anger of the Lord, the God of Israel, than did all the kings of Israel before him." (1 Kings 16:30-33). There is then an intriguing "note" at the end of 1 Kings 16. The destruction of Jeroicho by Joshua was dreadfully complete. Joshua atated that anyone rebuilding the walled city would pay a price- the price of the life of the firstborn son (Joshua 6:26). That is exactly the price paid by Hiel of Bethel: *"In Ahab's time, Hiel of Bethel rebuilt Jericho. He laid its foundations at the cost of his firstborn son Abiram, and he set up its gates at the cost of his youngest son Segub, in accordance with the word of the Lord spoken by Joshua son of Nun."* (1 Kings 16:34).

Enter Elijah the Tishbite. We are to see a long and protracted struggle between him and Ahab and Jezebel, Ahab's evil wife. Elijah's first challenge to the king was "no water"- the Scripture says: *"As the LORD, the God of Israel, lives, whom I serve, there will be neither dew nor rain in the next few years except at my word."* (1 Kings 17:1). It was time for Ahab to see that he was not God, and that evil has its consequences. Ahad was evil, but his wife Jezebel was worse (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jezebel). According to this reference: "According to the biblical accounts, Jezebel incited her husband King Ahab to abandon the worship of Yahweh and encourage worship of the deities Baal and Asherah instead. Jezebel is said to have persecuted the prophets of Yahweh, and to have fabricated false evidence of blasphemy against an innocent landowner who refused to sell his property to King Ahab, causing the landowner to be put to death. For these transgressions against the God and people of Israel, the Bible relates, Jezebel met a gruesome death - thrown out of a window by members of her own court retinue, and the flesh of her corpse eaten by stray dogs. Jezebel became associated with false prophets. In some interpretations, her dressing in finery and putting on

makeup before her death led to the association of use of cosmetics with "painted women" or prostitutes." So she was, in a real senese to consummation of evil in a single person."

Now that Elijah has fired a "shot across the bow" to Ahab, he wisely left and went into hiding. An agriculture based economy like ancient Israel would certainly suffer terribly from a drought, and Ahad was certain not to take this bold move lightly- he would be sure to try to exact punishment on the "messenger of bad news"! So Elijah went and hid near a brook in the Kerith Ravine, and ravens brought him food. This would not be the last time that God would provide miraculously for Elijah. (1 Kings 17:2-6). As a consequence of the drought, the brrok dried up, and once more God miraculously intervened on behalf of His servant Elijah- he was led to a widow in Zarephath, who was caring for her young son: *"Some time later the brook dried up because there had been no rain in the land. Then the word of the Lord came to him: "Go at once to Zarephath in the region of Sidon and stay there. I have directed a widow there to supply you with food." So he went to Zarephath. When he came to the town gate, a widow was there gathering sticks. He called to her and asked, "Would you bring me a little water in a jar so I may have a drink?" As she was going to get it, he called, "And bring me, please, a piece of bread." "As surely as the Lord your God lives," she replied, "I don't have any bread—only a handful of flour in a jar and a little olive oil in a jug. I am gathering a few sticks to take home and make a meal for myself and my son, that we may eat it—and die." Elijah said to her, "Don't be afraid. Go home and do as you have said. But first make a small loaf of bread for me from what you have and bring it to me, and then make something for yourself and your son. For this is what the Lord, the God of Israel, says: 'The jar of flour will not be used up and the jug of oil will not run dry until the day the Lord sends rain on the land.'"* (1 Kings 17:7-14). Threee tears of endless supply- timed according tho the departure of rain from Israel- the widow and Elijah would both benefit from God's generosity and provision.

Then the boy became ill, and Elijah, for some reason, was blamed by the widow for this misfortune. But Elijah was soon to see the power of God- Elijah was able to literally breathe life back into the boy: *"Some time later the son of the woman who owned the house became ill. He grew worse and worse, and finally stopped breathing. She said to Elijah, "What do you have against me, man of God? Did you come to remind me of my sin and kill my son?" "Give me your son," Elijah replied. He took him from her arms, carried him to the upper room where he was staying, and laid him on his bed. Then he cried out to the Lord, "Lord my God, have you brought tragedy even on this widow I am staying with, by causing her son to die?" Then he stretched himself out on the boy three times and cried out to the Lord, "Lord my God, let this boy's life return to him!" The Lord heard Elijah's cry, and the boy's life returned to him, and he lived. Elijah picked up the child and carried him down from the room into the house. He gave him to his mother and said, "Look, your son is alive!" Then the woman said to Elijah, "Now I know that you are a man of God and that the word of the Lord from your mouth is the truth."* (1 Kings 17:17-24)

Elijah then met Obadiah, a faithful servant of God, who had been hiding the true prophets of God from Jezebel, who had determined to kill them. Ahab had, of course, been searching relentlessly for Elijah. Obadiah was fearful that if he foung=d Elijah and reported his finding to Ahab, that Ahab would then kill him. So

Elijah promised Obadiah that he would: “present myself to Ahab today.” (1 Kings 18:15). The end of the three years of drought was rapidly approaching, and Elijah was prepared to meet with his adversary Ahab.

Elijah appeared before Ahab, and got the reception he expected. Ahad accused Elijah of being a “troublemaker”. Elijah used this encounter as an opportunity to challenge the beliefs of the people, many of whom had turned to worship of the Baals. He challenged the king: *“So Obadiah went to meet Ahab and told him, and Ahab went to meet Elijah. When he saw Elijah, he said to him, “Is that you, you troubler of Israel? “I have not made trouble for Israel,” Elijah replied. “But you and your father’s family have. You have abandoned the LORD’s commands and have followed the Baals. Now summon the people from all over Israel to meet me on Mount Carmel. And bring the four hundred and fifty prophets of Baal and the four hundred prophets of Asherah, who eat at Jezebel’s table.” So Ahab sent word throughout all Israel and assembled the prophets on Mount Carmel. Elijah went before the people and said, “How long will you waver between two opinions? If the LORD is God, follow him; but if Baal is God, follow him.”* (1 KImgs 18:16-21a) So now the stage was set for the ultimate challenge of the power and authority of God over the “false gods”. Elijah was not against using sarcasm and bitter humor to illustrate the powerlessness of the Baals, and was quick to demonstrate the power of the true God! *“At noon Elijah began to taunt them. “Shout louder!” he said. “Surely he is a god! Perhaps he is deep in thought, or busy, or traveling. Maybe he is sleeping and must be awakened.” So they shouted louder and slashed themselves with swords and spears, as was their custom, until their blood flowed. Midday passed, and they continued their frantic prophesying until the time for the evening sacrifice. But there was no response, no one answered, no one paid attention.’*(1 Kings 18:27-29). And now the climactic event- God would send fire from heaven to consume the offering, even though the offering had been doused with water three times!

And now the people were to know- by first hand experience- who the true God of Israel was! “At the time of sacrifice, the prophet Elijah stepped forward and prayed: *“Lord, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Israel, let it be known today that you are God in Israel and that I am your servant and have done all these things at your command. Answer me, Lord, answer me, so these people will know that you, Lord, are God, and that you are turning their hearts back again.” Then the fire of the Lord fell and burned up the sacrifice, the wood, the stones and the soil, and also licked up the water in the trench. When all the people saw this, they fell prostrate and cried, “The Lord—he is God! The Lord—he is God!”* (1 Kings 18:36-40). And to complete the demonstration of God’s power- the rain was to return at Elijah’s bidding*: “And Elijah said to Ahab, “Go, eat and drink, for there is the sound of a heavy rain.” So Ahab went off to eat and drink, but Elijah climbed to the top of Carmel, bent down to the ground and put his face between his knees. “Go and look toward the sea,” he told his servant. And he went up and looked.*
“There is nothing there,” he said. Seven times Elijah said, “Go back.” The seventh time the servant reported, “A cloud as small as a man’s hand is rising from the sea.” So Elijah said, “Go and tell Ahab, ‘Hitch up your chariot and go down before the rain stops you.’” Meanwhile, the sky grew black with clouds, the wind rose, a heavy rain started falling and Ahab rode off to Jezreel. The power of the Lord came on Elijah and, tucking his cloak into his belt, he ran ahead of Ahab all the way to

Jezreel." (1 Kings 18:41-45). The rain had fallen- just as Elijah prophesied, the prophets of Baal were shown to be false and were slaughtered, and God had sent fire from heaven- and the people realized He was God! And yet Ahab would still persist in his evil.

John 1:29-51

Jesus had been sent by God- and John was sent to bear witness to Him. John saw Jesus at Bethany, where he was baptizing and announced to all who would hear: *"Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world! This is the one I meant when I said, 'A man who comes after me has surpassed me because he was before me.' I myself did not know him, but the reason I came baptizing with water was that he might be revealed to Israel." Then John gave this testimony: "I saw the Spirit come down from heaven as a dove and remain on him. And I myself did not know him, but the one who sent me to baptize with water told me, 'The man on whom you see the Spirit come down and remain is the one who will baptize with the Holy Spirit.' I have seen and I testify that this is God's Chosen One."* (John 1:29b-34). The King James version is perhaps more poetic: "Behold the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world." (John 1:29b KJV) I am now working on an unwritten (as yet) praise sone entitled "Behold the Lamb" taken from this passage in John. I hope to complete and present it in worship sometime this year.

Jesus then begins to call His disciples- first Andrew and Simon- who Jesus renames "Peter" (the Rock!) (John 1:35-42). Peter, son of John, is referred to in the Cotton Patch Gospel as "Rock Johnson"- and Joseph is referred to as "Joe Davidson"- Joseph, son of David! Jesus then calls Phillip and Nathaniel, who foolow Jesus out of wonder and amazement that He saw them "under a fig tree". After responding to Jeus' simple call "follow me" (John 1:43), Nathaniel questions Jesus: *"How do you know me?" Nathanael asked. Jesus answered, "I saw you while you were still under the fig tree before Philip called you." Then Nathanael declared, "Rabbi, you are the Son of God; you are the king of Israel." Jesus said, "You believe because I told you I saw you under the fig tree. You will see greater things than that." He then added, "Very truly I tell you, you will see 'heaven open, and the angels of God ascending and descending on' the Son of Man."* (John 1:48-51). Greater things they will certainly see, and very soon!

Jesus Calls Peter and Andrew

1 Kings 19-20 May 9, 2014 John 2

Now Elijah was in trouble! He had been noticed- unfavorable- by Jezebel, Ahab's wife. She had promoted the "prophets of Baal" and now many of them had been slaughtered at Elijah's direction. Her statement wa clear and threatening: *"May the gods deal with me, be it ever so severely, if by this time tomorrow I do not make your life like that of one of them."* (1 Kings 19:2b). In other words- by tomorrow I pledge that you will be dead like the prophets of Baal you had slaughtered. So Elijah fled- and like the angels ministering to Jesus after fasting forty days in the wilderness- the angels of God ministered to and protected Elijah: *"When he came to Beersheba in Judah, he left his servant there, while he himself went a day's journey into the wilderness. He came to a broom bush, sat down under it and prayed that he might die. "I have had enough, Lord," he said. "Take my life; I am no better than my ancestors." Then he lay down under the bush and fell asleep. All at once an angel touched him and said, "Get up and eat." He looked around, and there by his head was some bread baked over hot coals, and a jar of water. He ate and drank and then lay down again. The angel of the Lord came back a second time and touched him and said, "Get up and eat, for the journey is too much for you." So he got up and ate and drank. Strengthened by that food, he traveled forty days and forty nights until he reached Horeb, the mountain of God. There he went into a cave and spent the night."* (1 Kings 19:3b-8). Elijah was ready to die- to abandon the role that God had claaed him to. So God spoke to Elijah, as he hid in a cave near Mount Horeb: *"Then a voice said to him, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" He replied, "I have been very zealous for the Lord God Almighty. The Israelites have rejected your covenant, torn down your altars, and put your prophets to death with the sword. I am the only one left, and now they are trying to kill me too."*

The Lord said to him, "Go back the way you came, and go to the Desert of Damascus. When you get there, anoint Hazael king over Aram. Also, anoint Jehu

son of Nimshi king over Israel, and anoint Elisha son of Shaphat from Abel Meholah to succeed you as prophet. Jehu will put to death any who escape the sword of Hazael, and Elisha will put to death any who escape the sword of Jehu. Yet I reserve seven thousand in Israel—all whose knees have not bowed down to Baal and whose mouths have not kissed him." (1 Kings 19:13b-18)

Then Elisha son of Shaphat enters the story. He is to be Elijah's protégé, and a valuable part of Elijah's ministry as prophet and man of God. Elisha accepts Elijah's call to follow him: *"So Elijah went from there and found Elisha son of Shaphat. He was plowing with twelve yoke of oxen, and he himself was driving the twelfth pair. Elijah went up to him and threw his cloak around him. Elisha then left his oxen and ran after Elijah. "Let me kiss my father and mother goodbye," he said, "and then I will come with you."* (1 Kings 19:19:20a).

Ben Hadad of Aram besieged Samaria and intended to dethrone Ahab. He sent messengers to make demands: *"This is what Ben-Hadad says: 'Your silver and gold are mine, and the best of your wives and children are mine.'[4] The king of Israel answered, "Just as you say, my lord the king. I and all I have are yours." The messengers came again and said, "This is what Ben-Hadad says: 'I sent to demand your silver and gold, your wives and your children. But about this time tomorrow I am going to send my officials to search your palace and the houses of your officials. They will seize everything you value and carry it away.'"*(1 Kings 20:2b-6). The second demand, to search and carry away everything of value was too much, and Ahab rejected the demands of ben Hadad. There then ensued a great battle between the Arameans and the Samarian forces (the tribes of northern Israel and not "Samaritans") A "prophet" then appeared and spoke to Ahab, saying : *"This is what the Lord says: 'Do you see this vast army? I will give it into your hand today, and then you will know that I am the Lord.'"* (1 Kings 20:13b). Exactly why a prophet- presumably an authentic prophet and not one of Baal or other false gods- would appear and give encouragement to Ahab is a mystery to me. Perhaps God's plans included the defeat of Ben Hadad, and temporary victory for Ahab. Additional insight into the appearance of this prophet- evidence of God's continuing interest in Israel despite the evil in its king- is found at (http://www.biblestudytools.com/commentaries/jamieson-fausset-brown/1-kings/1-kings-20.html). Ahab's forces did prevail, and a treaty of peace as established between Ben Hadad and Ahab (1 Kings 20:15-34). Then in a very puzzling sequence of events, one of the "prophets" demands that his companion "strike him" (1 Kings 20:35-36). The companion refused, and the prophet stated that the companion who refused would then be killed by a lion, which is exactly what happened. The prophet then found another who would strike and injure him. The prophet then went in disguise to Ahab and told him a made up story about how he had allowed a prisoner go free when he was distracted. *"As the king passed by, the prophet called out to him, "Your servant went into the thick of the battle, and someone came to me with a captive and said, 'Guard this man. If he is missing, it will be your life for his life, or you must pay a talent[c] of silver.' While your servant was busy here and there, the man disappeared." "That is your sentence," the king of Israel said. "You have pronounced it yourself."* (1 Kings 20:39-40). The prophet then reveals himself to the king- who recognizes him as one of the prophets, and then the prophet says: *"This is what the Lord says: 'You have set free a man I had*

determined should die. Therefore it is your life for his life, your people for his people.'"(1 Kings 20:41-42). The king then returns to the city "sullen and angry" (1 Kings 20:43a) The Lord desired that Ben Hadad be destroyed, and by the army of Israel- and Ahab had not obeyed God's command. He was angry and sullen not because of his sin, but because he had been held accountable by God (http://www.enduringword.com/commentaries/1120.htm).

John 2

Weddings- usually joyous occasions where friends and family celebrate the new life of a couple together. Wine flowed freely in a typical weding, as it did in this one- but the host had not planned well. The wine was running out. Mary, mother of Jesus told Jesus *"they have no more wine".* Jesus was reluctant to intervene*: "Woman, why do you involve me?" Jesus replied. "My hour has not yet come."* (John 2:4). Many have concluded that Jesus was reluctant to start a "public" ministry by performing the miracle of transformation. He was very deliberate about timing throughout His ministry, and wanted to carefully follow His father at every point. Yet, Mary seemed to assume that Jesus was agreeable to help. After all, were they not invited guests? And weren't Jesus' disciples present also? So Mary told the servants: *"Do whatever he tells you."* (John 2:5b).

And the miracle of transformation was a true indicator of God's provision- not only was there wine produced in abundance (six 20-30 gallon jars), but it was "the best" wine: *"Everyone brings out the choice wine first and then the cheaper wine after the guests have had too much to drink; but you have saved the best till now."* (John 2:10b). And Jesus graciously allowed the host- the bridegroom- to take credit for it! And John is careful to point out that this was the first "sign" that Jesus performed, so that His disciples- and we who read the gospel account later- would believe in Him: *"What Jesus did here in Cana of Galilee was the first of the signs through which he revealed his glory; and his disciples believed in him."* (John 2:11). The "signs" were heavenly credentials, and John carefully and deliberately includes and highlights them so that he can accomplish the purpose of his gospel: *"Jesus performed many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. But these are written that you may believe[b] that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name."* (John 20:30b-31).

In John's gospel account, Jesus "clears the Temple" of moneychangers and crooked animal salesmen at the first Passover mentioned. The synoptic gospels mention this event at the last Passove in Jesus' public ministry. When Jesus saw what kind of activity was being conducted at the Temple, He acted decisively and with righteous anger (anger at the sin rahte than the sinner): *"So he made a whip out of cords, and drove all from the temple courts, both sheep and cattle; he scattered the coins of the money changers and overturned their tables. To those who sold doves he said, "Get these out of here! Stop turning my Father's house into a market!" His disciples remembered that it is written: "Zeal for your house will consume me."* (John 2:15-17, quoting Psalm 69:9).

The people then ask Jesus for a "sign" of His authority*: "What sign can you show us to prove your authority to do all this?" Jesus answered them, "Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days." They replied, "It has taken forty-six years to*

build this temple, and you are going to raise it in three days?" But the temple he had spoken of was his body. After he was raised from the dead, his disciples recalled what he had said. Then they believed the scripture and the words that Jesus had spoken." (John 2:18b-21) And so we see that "signs" were the coin of the realm for those claiming to be "sent from God". The people demanded them, and were fascinated by them. The religious leaders sought them to determine the validity and authenticity of the calling and office of those who claimed to be from God. And John skillfully includes "signs" to point his readers to the same conclusion- thet Jesus truly was the Messiah!

Jesus performed other "signs" during this Passover season, but He was wise in the ways of men and knew that the "belief" propmpted by experiencing a miraculous sign did not necessarily take root in the heart- it would always take a commitment, and act of the will and repentance- to generate a true follower of His! *"Now while he was in Jerusalem at the Passover Festival, many people saw the signs he was performing and believed in his name. But Jesus would not entrust himself to them, for he knew all people. He did not need any testimony about mankind, for he knew what was in each person."* (John 2:23-25)

1 Kings 21-22 May 10, 2014 John 3:1-21

The story of Naboth's vineyard is an excellent illustration of the way consequences for evil come back to the one committing sin. In this case, the greed of Ahad was so immense that he took all the measures he could take-including some that were discgraceful and sinful- to accomplish his objective. It is also an illustration of how evil influence can come from another person- in this case from the evil Jezebel. The story unfolds like this: *"Some time later there was an incident involving a vineyard*

belonging to Naboth the Jezreelite. The vineyard was in Jezreel, close to the palace of Ahab king of Samaria. Ahab said to Naboth, "Let me have your vineyard to use for a vegetable garden, since it is close to my palace. In exchange I will give you a better vineyard or, if you prefer, I will pay you whatever it is worth." But Naboth replied, "The Lord forbid that I should give you the inheritance of my ancestors." So Ahab went home, sullen and angry because Naboth the Jezreelite had said, "I will not give you the inheritance of my ancestors." He lay on his bed sulking and refused to eat. His wife Jezebel came in and asked him, "Why are you so sullen? Why won't you eat?" He answered her, "Because I said to Naboth the Jezreelite, 'Sell me your vineyard; or if you prefer, I will give you another vineyard in its place.' But he said, 'I will not give you my vineyard.'" Jezebel his wife said, "Is this how you act as king over Israel? Get up and eat! Cheer up. I'll get you the vineyard of Naboth the Jezreelite." (1 Kings 21:1-7). The king was putting like a sullen child who doesn't get their way, and Jezebel is not shy about suggesting, and carrying out a plot of evil to which Ahab is compliant. After all, isn't he the king? Doesn't he "deserve" all he wants? And so goes the thinking of power and entitlement.

Jezebel's plan is cunning. She writes a letter- in Ahab's name and with his eal- to the "nobles" and arranges for them to stone Naboth to death. After Naboth is gone, then the vineyard coveted by Ahab will finally be his: *"Proclaim a day of fasting and seat Naboth in a prominent place among the people. But seat two scoundrels opposite him and have them bring charges that he has cursed both God and the king. Then take him out and stone him to death."* (1 Kings 21:9b-10). And sure enough, the plan is carried out and Naboth is eliminated- leaving the vineyard to be claimed by Ahab. Jezebel urges Ahab on to action: *"As soon as Jezebel heard that Naboth had been stoned to death, she said to Ahab, "Get up and take possession of the vineyard of Naboth the Jezreelite that he refused to sell you. He is no longer alive, but dead." When Ahab heard that Naboth was dead, he got up and went down to take possession of Naboth's vineyard."* (1 Kings 21:15-16). His enjoyment of ill gotten gains is brief, for Elijah hears of this evil acts and is quick to proclaim judgment and condemnation from God Himself. *"Ahab said to Elijah, "So you have found me, my enemy!" "I have found you," he answered, "because you have sold yourself to do evil in the eyes of the Lord. He says, 'I am going to bring disaster on you. I will wipe out your descendants and cut off from Ahab every last male in Israel —slave or free. I will make your house like that of Jeroboam son of Nebat and that of Baasha son of Ahijah, because you have aroused my anger and have caused Israel to sin.' "And also concerning Jezebel the Lord says: 'Dogs will devour Jezebel by the wall of Jezreel.'24 "Dogs will eat those belonging to Ahab who die in the city, and the birds will feed on those who die in the country."* (1 Kings 21:20-24).

Ahab is "repentant" but his fasting and sackcloth are inadequate for the crime he has committed. However, God is ever faithful and forgiving, and relents somewhat on the harsh sentence imposed on Ahab: "*Then the word of the LORD came to Elijah the Tishbite: **29** "Have you noticed how Ahab has humbled himself before me? Because he has humbled himself, I will not bring this disaster in his day, but I will bring it on his house in the days of his son."(*1 Kings 21:28-29). Lest we think God was too generous, it is important to realize that Ahab later died in battle (1 Kings 22:37-38).

And now we come to the issue of “false prophets”. The issue was war with the Arameans over Ramoth Gilead. (http://biblehub.com/topical/r/ramoth-gilead.htm) Ahab and Jehosephat (son of Asa) decided to join forces against the Arameans, but Jehosephat (a good king!) wanted to seek God’s counsel before going into battle. Unlike the many falso prophets. God’s true prophet Micaiah delivered the truth from God and not “what the king wanted to hear”: *“All the other prophets were prophesying the same thing. “Attack Ramoth Gilead and be victorious,” they said, “for the Lord will give it into the king’s hand.” The messenger who had gone to summon Micaiah said to him, “Look, the other prophets without exception are predicting success for the king. Let your word agree with theirs, and speak favorably.” But Micaiah said, “As surely as the Lord lives, I can tell him only what the Lord tells me.” When he arrived, the king asked him, “Micaiah, shall we go to war against Ramoth Gilead, or not?” “Attack and be victorious,” he answered, “for the Lord will give it into the king’s hand.” The king said to him, “How many times must I make you swear to tell me nothing but the truth in the name of the Lord?” Then Micaiah answered, “I saw all Israel scattered on the hills like sheep without a shepherd, and the Lord said, ‘These people have no master. Let each one go home in peace.’”* (1 Kings 22:12-17). And Micaiah’s prophesy was proven to be true. For Ahab- disguised to deflect attention from himself- was killed in bathe by a “random” arrow: *‘But someone drew his bow at random and hit the king of Israel between the sections of his armor. The king told his chariot driver, “Wheel around and get me out of the fighting. I’ve been wounded.” All day long the battle raged, and the king was propped up in his chariot facing the Arameans. The blood from his wound ran onto the floor of the chariot, and that evening he died. As the sun was setting, a cry spread through the army: “Every man to his town. Every man to his land!”* (1 Kings 22:34-36). The arrow was not truly ‘random” – for there are never “coincidences” but on “God instances”- in this case the arrow carried out the death sentence that God Himself had promised.

The story then turns to Jehosphat, subject of the popular saying “jumping Jehosephat”. “The king's name in the oath jumping Jehosaphat was likely popularized by the name's utility as a euphemism for Jesus and Jehovah. The phrase is first recorded in the 1866 novel The Headless Horseman by Thomas Mayne Reid. The longer version "By the shaking, jumping ghost of Jehosaphat" is seen in the 1865 novel Paul Peabody by Percy Bolingbroke St. John.” (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jehoshaphat). The Scripture declares Jehosephat to be praiseworthy, except for his omission of removing the “high places” of worship to false gods: *“In everything he followed the ways of his father Asa and did not stray from them; he did what was right in the eyes of the Lord.”* (1 Kings 22:43a). It is of interest (at least to me) that Jehosephat tried to create a navy for Israel: *“Now Jehoshaphat built a fleet of trading ships to go to Ophir for gold, but they never set sail—they were wrecked at Ezion Geber. At that time Ahaziah son of Ahab said to Jehoshaphat, “Let my men sail with yours,” but Jehoshaphat refused.* (1 Kings 22:48-49) Jehosephat then was succeeded by Jehoram his son. Ahab- king of Israel- was succeeded by his son Ahaziah, another in the line of “evil kings” of Israel*: “Ahaziah son of Ahab became king of Israel in Samaria in the seventeenth year of Jehoshaphat king of Judah, and he reigned over Israel two years. He did evil in the eyes of the Lord, because he followed the ways of his father and mother and of Jeroboam son of Nebat, who caused Israel to sin. He served and worshiped Baal*

and aroused the anger of the Lord, the God of Israel, just as his father had done." (1 Kings 22:51-53)

Jezebel and Ahab meeting Elijah, print by Sir Francis Dicksee (1853-1928)

John 3:1-21

We now encounter another Pharisee, this time Nicodemus, who was one of the Pharisees who saw fit to inquire of Jesus about the Kingdom of God. He was so fearful of being seen by his fellow "experts" that he visited Jesus under the cover of darkness. This fact has led my friend Wes Taylor to refer to Nicodemus as "Nick at Night" – a name for the popular Nickelodeon show (http://www.nickatnite.com/). Nicodemus was a sincere seeker of truth, and he was rewarded for his sincere questions by a large measure of God's truth. It is in this context that we find what must be the most quoted verse in all of Scripture- John 3:16. In the NIV translation it reads: *"For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believesin him shall not perish but have eternal life."* This key verse is found right after Jesus described to Nicodemus how He must be "lifted up" like the bronze serpent Moses lifted to heal his people of snakebite.

Jesus insists to *Nicodemus that we must be "born again" to enter the Kingdom of God and be saved: Jesus replied, "Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again." "How can someone be born when they are old?" Nicodemus asked. "Surely they cannot enter a second time into their mother's womb to be born!"* (John 3:3-4). And Nicodemus, thinking literally, does not

understand. How often we miss the truth in God's Word because we cannot, or will not, open our minds to God's truth and empty ourselves of our own "wisdom and experience". What Jesus was proposing was a radical departure from "keeping the Law"- the formula that the "experts" proposed. Jesus goes to the very heart of the matter- that is, our very "hearts". Unless we change from within, we will never fully experience the joy and triumph of living within God's will. As Jesus taught elsewhere, it is the heart that is deceptive and the sourec of evil, and it is the heart (the very essence of who we really are) that must change and be transformed by the Spirit. In this Scripture we see clearly what God's intent was-and is- for all of us- not condemnation but transformation by His amazing undeserved love! John describes it this way: *"For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because they have not believed in the name of God's one and only Son. This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but people loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil. Everyone who does evil hates the light, and will not come into the light for fear that their deeds will be exposed. But whoever lives by the truth comes into the light, so that it may be seen plainly that what they have done has been done in the sight of God."* (John 3:17-21). Not condemned- saved! Not darkness- light! Not death- eternal life with Him! Amen and amen!

2 Kings 1-3 May 11, 2014 John 3:22-36

The Moabites were in rebellion- and the king had grievously injured himself by falling through a ceiling lattice. So Ahaziah sent an envoy to the pagan god "Baal-Zebub, the god of Ekron" (2 Kings 1:2b) to see if he would survive the injury. Elijah was offended by this, saying: "Is it because there is no God in Israel that you are going off to consult Baal-Zebub, the god of Ekron?' 4 Therefore this is what the Lord says: 'You will not leave the bed you are lying on. You will certainly die!'" So Elijah went." (2 Kings 1:3b-4). Elijah said this to the king's messengers, who relayed the message back to Ahaziah. Then the king, having determined that this word came from Elijah, sent soldiers to Elizah- a captain and fifty men- to demand that Elijah "Come down". How dare Elijah challenge the judgment and authority of the king- or so Ahaziah thought! When the first contingent reached Elijah, they commanded him – as ordered- ""Come down" and Elijah answered them: "If I am a man of God, may fire come down from heaven and consume you and your fifty men!" Then fire fell from heaven and consumed the captain and his men." (2 Kings 1:7-10). This whole scenario was repeated, and Elijah called fire from heaven and consumed the second contingent of men. The third captain, having heard about the fate of the first two, approached Elijah with fear and respect: "Man of God," he begged, "please have respect for my life and the lives of these fifty men, your servants! 14 See, fire has fallen from heaven and consumed the first two captains and all their men. But now have respect for my life!" (2 Kings 1:13b-14). The an angel/messenger assured Elijah that he could safely approach the king, and he went and told him that because of his faithlessness and seeking "flase gods" that God had judges him and that he would die: The angel of the Lord said to Elijah, "Go down with him; do not be afraid of him." So Elijah got up and went down with him to the king.
16 He told the king, "This is what the Lord says: Is it because there is no God in Israel for you to consult that you have sent messengers to consult Baal-Zebub, the god of Ekron? Because you have done this, you will never leave the bed you are

lying on. You will certainly die!” 17 So he died, according to the word of the Lord that Elijah had spoken.” (2 Kings 1:15-17). After Ahaziah’s death, Joram succeeded him, since Ahaziah had no son .

Only two men were taken up to heaven without experiencing death- Enoch (Genesis 5:22-29) and Elijah (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Enoch_(ancestor_of_Noah)). Before Elijah is taken up and passes the mantle of the prophetic office to Elisha, they younger Elisha assures Elijah that he would never leave hin (2 Kings 2:4b). Elijah performs a last miracle- separation of the waters, and then is taken up into heaven on a fiery chariot. The Scripture describes these events this way: Fifty men from the company of the prophets went and stood at a distance, facing the place where Elijah and Elisha had stopped at the Jordan. 8 Elijah took his cloak, rolled it up and struck the water with it. The water divided to the right and to the left, and the two of them crossed over on dry ground. 9 When they had crossed, Elijah said to Elisha, “Tell me, what can I do for you before I am taken from you?” “Let me inherit a double portion of your spirit,” Elisha replied.
10 “You have asked a difficult thing,” Elijah said, “yet if you see me when I am taken from you, it will be yours—otherwise, it will not.” 11 As they were walking along and talking together, suddenly a chariot of fire and horses of fire appeared and separated the two of them, and Elijah went up to heaven in a whirlwind. 12 Elisha saw this and cried out, “My father! My father! The chariots and horsemen of Israel!” And Elisha saw him no more. Then he took hold of his garment and tore it in two.” (2 Kings 2:7-12). Elisha wisely asked for a “double portion” of Elijah’s spirit, just as Solomon asked for wisdom- but Elisha’s stewardship of his gift was far superior to Solomon’s. Elisha’s first evidence that he has, indeed, inherited Elijah’s spirit was the miraculous “parting of water” by Elijah’s cloak, which had been left behind. Some in the party of “prophets” with Elisha suggested that Elijah might still be on the earth, that God might hae simply moved Elijah elsewhere: “Perhaps the Spirit of the LORD has picked him up and set him down on some mountain or in some valley.” (2 Kings 2:16b). But Elijah was nowhere to be found- he was truly “taken up”!

Elijah and Elisha

Then a sequence of events occurs that dramatically underscore the spirit given to Elisha. He first purifies water by putting "salt" in a bowl and casting it into the impure water. Elisha proclaimed that the Lord had healed the water: *"This is what the Lord says: 'I have healed this water. Never again will it cause death or make the land unproductive.'" And the water has remained pure to this day, according to the word Elisha had spoken."* (2 Kings 2:21b-22). Then as Elisha approached the city of Bethel, he was made fun of by some boys, who were promptly and horrendously punished: *"Get out of here, baldy!" they said. "Get out of here, baldy!" He turned around, looked at them and called down a curse on them in the name of the LORD. Then two bears came out of the woods and mauled forty-two of the boys. And he went on to Mount Carmel and from there returned to Samaria."* (2 Kings 2:23b-25). The punishment to us – especially a "modern" reader seems overly harsh- but the real issue is the honor and respect due to God and His appointed prophet.

Moab then rebelled against Israel. The king of Moab had been accustomed to giving a tribute of ivestock to the king of Israel, but when Ahaziah died and Joram took over, the king of Moab decided to end the tribute. Joram immediately decided to fight with Moab over this issue, and enlisted the help of Jehosephat. The combined forces went to attack Moab, passing through the desert or Edom. (2 Kings 3:1-8). The combined armies then ran out of water, and sought help from Elisha. After

initially refusing to help, Elisha promised them water: *So the king of Israel set out with the king of Judah and the king of Edom. After a roundabout march of seven days, the army had no more water for themselves or for the animals with them. "What!" exclaimed the king of Israel. "Has the Lord called us three kings together only to deliver us into the hands of Moab?" But Jehoshaphat asked, "Is there no prophet of the Lord here, through whom we may inquire of the Lord?" An officer of the king of Israel answered, "Elisha son of Shaphat is here. He used to pour water on the hands of Elijah." Jehoshaphat said, "The word of the Lord is with him." So the king of Israel and Jehoshaphat and the king of Edom went down to him. Elisha said to the king of Israel, "Why do you want to involve me? Go to the prophets of your father and the prophets of your mother." "No," the king of Israel answered, "because it was the Lord who called us three kings together to deliver us into the hands of Moab." Elisha said, "As surely as the Lord Almighty lives, whom I serve, if I did not have respect for the presence of Jehoshaphat king of Judah, I would not pay any attention to you. But now bring me a harpist."*

While the harpist was playing, the hand of the Lord came on Elisha and he said, "This is what the Lord says: I will fill this valley with pools of water. For this is what the Lord says: You will see neither wind nor rain, yet this valley will be filled with water, and you, your cattle and your other animals will drink. This is an easy thing in the eyes of the Lord; he will also deliver Moab into your hands. You will overthrow every fortified city and every major town. You will cut down every good tree, stop up all the springs, and ruin every good field with stones." (2 Kings 3:9-19). So Elisha not only promised an abundance of water, but complete victory over Edom. Once the water appeared as promised, the Edomites saw the body of water and though it was blood, and concluded that the armies of Israel and Judah were in turmoil and confusion. So the Moabites boldly approached the camp of Israel, only to be net with a full fighting force that overcame them- and some of them fled for refuge in the walled city of Kir Haseth. The king, seeing that defeat was at hand, sacrificed his first born- his successor as king- at the city wall (2 Kings 3:21-27). Then the Edomites returned to their own land.

John 3:22-36

John the Baptist had a clear understanding of his role in the Kingdom. He continued to baptize *"with water"* (John 1:31) in the Judean countryside, and also at *"Aenon near Salem"* where there was an abundance of water (John 3:23). Another was also baptizing, and John's disciples told him: *"Rabbi, that man who was with you on the other side of the Jordan—the one you testified about—look, he is baptizing, and everyone is going to him."* (John 3:26). And John's answer to this "challenge" is very revealing- John says: *"A person can receive only what is given them from heaven. You yourselves can testify that I said, 'I am not the Messiah but am sent ahead of him.' The bride belongs to the bridegroom. The friend who attends the bridegroom waits and listens for him, and is full of joy when he hears the bridegroom's voice. That joy is mine, and it is now complete. He must become greater; I must become less."* (John 3:27b-30). So the "one you testified about"- Jesus- was voluntarily given a "higher place" by John- the Messiah was to "increase" and John "decrease"- and this was perfectly acceptable to John, who served God with great humility.

John then testifies beautifully to the power and authority of Jesus: *"The one who comes from above is above all; the one who is from the earth belongs to the earth, and speaks as one from the earth. The one who comes from heaven is above all. He testifies to what he has seen and heard, but no one accepts his testimony. Whoever has accepted it has certified that God is truthful. For the one whom God has sent speaks the words of God, for God gives the Spirit without limit. The Father loves the Son and has placed everything in his hands. Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life, but whoever rejects the Son will not see life, for God's wrath remains on them."* (John 3:31-36) Jesus is clearly seen as "above all", and having "everything in His hands" and is the "giver of eternal life".

2 Kings 4-5 May 12, 2014 John 4:1-30

Now Elisha has to solve a very practical problem. The widow of one of the "prophets" was destitute, and her creditor was coming to collecet what he owed- in the form of the sale of her two sons into slavery. Then Elisha tells her: *"How can I help you? Tell me, what do you have in your house?" "Your servant has nothing there at all," she said, "except a small jar of olive oil."*
Elisha said, "Go around and ask all your neighbors for empty jars. Don't ask for just a few. 4 Then go inside and shut the door behind you and your sons. Pour oil into all the jars, and as each is filled, put it to one side."(2 Kings 4:2b-4). Then, miraculously, the emty containers are filled with il and the creditor is paid off- sparing the widow's sons.

Among Elisha's travel destinations was Shunem. A wealthy but childless woman lived there and made provisions for Elisha to stay with her when he traveled in that region. Elisha repaid her kindness by promising her a son*: "About this time next year," Elisha said, "you will hold a son in your arms." "No, my lord!" she objected. "Please, man of God, don't mislead your servant!"*
But the woman became pregnant, and the next year about that same time she gave birth to a son, just as Elisha had told her." (2 Kings 4:16-17). Later, the boy became very ill, complaining of severe headaches, and his frantic mother went to seek Elisha's help. The Scripture then tells us: *When Elisha reached the house, there was the boy lying dead on his couch. He went in, shut the door on the two of them and prayed to the Lord. Then he got on the bed and lay on the boy, mouth to mouth, eyes to eyes, hands to hands. As he stretched himself out on him, the boy's body grew warm. Elisha turned away and walked back and forth in the room and then got on the bed and stretched out on him once more. The boy sneezed seven times and opened his eyes. Elisha summoned Gehazi and said, "Call the Shunammite." And he did. When she came, he said, "Take your son." She came in, fell at his feet and bowed to the ground. Then she took her son and went out."* (2 Kings 4:32-37). This restoring of life was a clear "sign" of the restoration that was to come through Jesus, who brought His friend Lazarus back from the dead (John 11:38-44).

Immediately following this incident, the Scripture reports a somewhat strange story of feeding the "prophets" with a stew containing a "wild vine" (2 Kings 4:39) which

the prophets could not eat because they thought it was poisomous. Elisha then adds flour to the stew and said:
*"Serve it to the people to eat." And there was nothing harmful in the pot."(*2 Kings 4:39b) Elisha then feeds "one hundred", clearly a type of Jesus' feeding of the four and five thousand: *A man came from Baal Shalishah, bringing the man of God twenty loaves of barley bread baked from the first ripe grain, along with some heads of new grain. "Give it to the people to eat," Elisha said. "How can I set this before a hundred men?" his servant asked. But Elisha answered, "Give it to the people to eat. For this is what the LORD says: 'They will eat and have some left over.'" Then he set it before them, and they ate and had some left over, according to the word of the LORD."* (2 Kings 4:42-44).

The following story, the cleansing of the warrior Naaman, was referred to by Jesus as an example of the inability to heal and perform miracles in Israel- it was easier to reach- and heal- the "foreigners" like Naaman (Luke 4:27). Naaman was a powerful and skilled warrior, but was afflicted with leprosy. When he heard there was a "prophet of God" in Samaria, he decided to seek him out to be cured of this horrible disease (2 Kings 5:1-6). Amazingly, when Naaman is told by a messenger what the prophet Elisha's prescribed cure is, he becomes angry: *Elisha sent a messenger to say to him, "Go, wash yourself seven times in the Jordan, and your flesh will be restored and you will be cleansed." But Naaman went away angry and said, "I thought that he would surely come out to me and stand and call on the name of the Lord his God, wave his hand over the spot and cure me of my leprosy. Are not Abana and Pharpar, the rivers of Damascus, better than all the waters of Israel? Couldn't I wash in them and be cleansed?" So he turned and went off in a rage."* (2 Kings 5:10-12). Only when a companion, a servant, challenges his anger does Naaman follow the "prescription" and become healed: Naaman's servants went to him and said, *"My father, if the prophet had told you to do some great thing, would you not have done it? How much more, then, when he tells you, 'Wash and be cleansed'!" So he went down and dipped himself in the Jordan seven times, as the man of God had told him, and his flesh was restored and became clean like that of a young boy."* (2 Kings 5:13-14). Then Gehazi, Elishas's servant, tries to "trick" Naaman into giving Elisha a gift in gratitude for his healing. Elisha had refused any compensation or gift, but Gehazi saw the opportunity for gain and obtained "two talents of silver" and "two sets" of clothing by deception. When Elisha confronted Gehazi with his knowledge of this trickery, Gehazi denied any wrong doing. Elisha knew the truth and condemned Gehazi to a lifetine of leprosy- a fitting punishment *"But Elisha said to him, "Was not my spirit with you when the man got down from his chariot to meet you? Is this the time to take money or to accept clothes—or olive groves and vineyards, or flocks and herds, or male and female slaves? Naaman's leprosy will cling to you and to your descendants forever." Then Gehazi went from Elisha's presence and his skin was leprous—it had become as white as snow."* (2 Kings 5:26-27). The two lessons here are very clear- obedience- accepting exactly what God has prescribed for you and trusting it is His best, and the penalty for sin and deceit, are clearly illustrated here. Would that we were always eager to follow God- exactly and completely!

John 4:1-30

The Pharisees had “heard” that Jesus was baptizing disciples and converst, but the truth was that Jesus’ disciples were doing the actual baptism. The disciples had been empowered to baptize, and in fact were sent out twice to do just that! Jesus then travels to Samaria. This in of itself is surprising, since Jews seldom traveled anywhere near the Samaritans. The hatred and contempt of this group of people was primarily centered on differences in belief. For more detail see (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Samaritans). Jesus sat by a well, near the noon hour. A Samaritan woman was soon on the scene, drawing water from the well, and Jesus enters into a long conversation with her. Jesus had the incredible ability to “see” people as God sees them- the goodness and evil in them, the pretenses and sins, the whole package. He saw this woman more clearly than she saw herself! The conversation as recorded went like this: *“Will you give me a drink?” 8 (His disciples had gone into the town to buy food.) The Samaritan woman said to him, “You are a Jew and I am a Samaritan woman. How can you ask me for a drink?” (For Jews do not associate with Samaritans.) Jesus answered her, “If you knew the gift of God and who it is that asks you for a drink, you would have asked him and he would have given you living water.” “Sir,” the woman said, “you have nothing to draw with and the well is deep. Where can you get this living water? Are you greater than our father Jacob, who gave us the well and drank from it himself, as did also his sons and his livestock?” Jesus answered, “Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks the water I give them will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give them will become in them a spring of water welling up to eternal life.” The woman said to him, “Sir, give me this water so that I won’t get thirsty and have to keep coming here to draw water.” He told her, “Go, call your husband and come back.” “I have no husband,” she replied. Jesus said to her, “You are right when you say you have no husband. The fact is, you have had five husbands, and the man you now have is not your husband. What you have just said is quite true.” “Sir,” the woman said, “I can see that you are a prophet. Our ancestors worshiped on this mountain, but you Jews claim that the place where we must worship is in Jerusalem.” “Woman,” Jesus replied, “believe me, a time is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. You Samaritans worship what you do not know; we worship what we do know, for salvation is from the Jews. Yet a time is coming and has now come when the true worshipers will worship the Father in the Spirit and in truth, for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks. God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in the Spirit and in truth.” The woman said, “I know that Messiah” (called Christ) “is coming. When he comes, he will explain everything to us.” Then Jesus declared, “I, the one speaking to you—I am he.”* (John 4:7b-26).

Notice several things in this interchange: 1) Jesus a Jew is freely talking with and associating with a woman- and a Samaritan; He is modeling the behavior that is pleasing to God- dealing with the person as a person and not an abstraction; 2) Jesus offers her something that sounds impossible on the face of it- “living water”. He always uses a “teachable moment” to give His listener insights- building on what they already know or have experienced; 3) Jesus clearly identifies Himself as Messiah- something that He almost never did (once more before the Sanhedrin at trial). And the woman believes Him, and spreads the word of her encounter: *“Then, leaving her water jar, the woman went back to the town and said to the people, “Come, see a man who told me everything I ever did. Could this be the*

Messiah?" They came out of the town and made their way toward him." (John 4:28b-30)

2 Kings 6-8 May 13, 2014 John 4:31-54

A floating axehead? Irone is denser than water, so it can't float! And so the "scientific view" of the world goes. Natural laws can never be broken- the universe is as it always was, and always will be- governed by immatable laws. Yet the Scripture says that Elisha was able to get an iron axehead to float by cutting a stick and throwing it into the water where the iron axehead had initially sunk (2 Kings 6:6). And God demonstates once again that He is not bound by the physical laws of the universe- He created them and has authority over them, as did His Son.

Then the Arameans conspire to attack Israel. When they launch their attack, they focused on Elisha who was in Dothan (not Alabama, Israel!). Elisha was calm though surrounded by vastly greater numbers, and stated: "Don't be afraid," the prophet answered. *"Those who are with us are more than those who are with them."* (2 Kings 6:16). And when God opened the eyes of Elisha's servant, he saw: the hills full of horses and chariots of fire all around Elisha. (2 Kings 6:17). The eyes of faith can see that the prophet- as well as all of God's people, are "guarded by angels" (Psalm 34:7). Elisha knew that and was not worried about the army approaching. He then prayed that they be struck blind, and God answered his request. Elisha led them to the walled city of Samaria, and then their eyes were opened. The king of Israel asked Elisha: *When the king of Israel saw them, he asked Elisha, "Shall I kill them, my father? Shall I kill them?"*

"Do not kill them," he answered. "Would you kill those you have captured with your own sword or bow? Set food and water before them so that they may eat and drink and then go back to their master." So he prepared a great feast for them, and after they had finished eating and drinking, he sent them away, and they returned to their master. So the bands from Aram stopped raiding Israel's territory." (2 Kings 6:21-23). So Elisha, with kindness, defused a potential enemy and put an end to an ongoing problem.

However, later the king of Aram –Ben Hadad- decided to attack Israel and lay siege to Samaria. So great ws the famine inside that the trapped Samaritans resorted to cannibalism (2 Kings 6:24-29). When the king of Israel finally consulted with Elisha, and Elisha prophesied: *"Hear the word of the Lord. This is what the Lord says: About this time tomorrow, a seah[e] of the finest flour will sell for a shekel and two seahs of barley for a shekel at the gate of Samaria."*

The officer on whose arm the king was leaning said to the man of God, "Look, even if the Lord should open the floodgates of the heavens, could this happen?" "You will see it with your own eyes," answered Elisha, "but you will not eat any of it!" (2 Kings 7:1b-2). Just about then four lepers who were at the entrance to the city gate reasoned among themselves that they should simply go and surrender to the Arameqn army encamped outside the city walls. After all, they reasoned- if we go into the city we will starve to death, and we may be able to surrender to the Arameans and live. So they went to the Aramean camp and found it deserted! (2 Kings 7:3-5). No one was there *"for the Lord had caused the Arameans to hear the sound of chariots and horses and a great army, so that they said to one another,*

"Look, the king of Israel has hired the Hittite and Egyptian kings to attack us!" So they got up and fled in the dusk and abandoned their tents and their horses and donkeys. They left the camp as it was and ran for their lives." (2 Kings 7:6-7). So they pillaged the camp, ate and drank until they were satisfied, abd began to feel guilty because they had not shared the 'good news" with the Samaritans hiding inside the city. And naturally those inside were incredulous- it was simply unbelievable that the Arameans had simply left. God had, of course, performed another miraculous delivery of His perpeopleut they refused to believe it at first. They decide to send a reconnaissance party out to see what was happening in the enemy camp: So they went and called out to the city gatekeepers and told them, *"We went into the Aramean camp and no one was there—not a sound of anyone—only tethered horses and donkeys, and the tents left just as they were." The gatekeepers shouted the news, and it was reported within the palace. The king got up in the night and said to his officers, "I will tell you what the Arameans have done to us. They know we are starving; so they have left the camp to hide in the countryside, thinking, 'They will surely come out, and then we will take them alive and get into the city.'" One of his officers answered, "Have some men take five of the horses that are left in the city. Their plight will be like that of all the Israelites left here—yes, they will only be like all these Israelites who are doomed. So let us send them to find out what happened."* (2 Kings 7:10-13).

The officer who had questioned Elisha was about to see God's power, but in a very judgmental and unpleasant way, as the people ran to the camp and plundered it, and then crushed him as they re-entered the city: "*So the messengers returned and reported to the king. Then the people went out and plundered the camp of the Arameans. So a seah of the finest flour sold for a shekel, and two seahs of barley sold for a shekel, as the Lord had said. Now the king had put the officer on whose arm he leaned in charge of the gate, and the people trampled him in the gateway, and he died, just as the man of God had foretold when the king came down to his house. It happened as the man of God had said to the king: "About this time tomorrow, a seah of the finest flour will sell for a shekel and two seahs of barley for a shekel at the gate of Samaria." The officer had said to the man of God, "Look, even if the Lord should open the floodgates of the heavens, could this happen?" The man of God had replied, "You will see it with your own eyes, but you will not eat any of it!" And that is exactly what happened to him, for the people trampled him in the gateway, and he died."* (2 Kings 7:15b-20). And as the man of God- Elisha had said- everything happened exactly as prophesied.

Then Elisha arranged with the king to have all the land the Shunamite woman had left behind restored to her. Ownership of land was a key value in the Hebrew society- its ownership established the status of the owner and provided some security as well. (http://www.mhs.no/aotp?42) Perhaps the king acted out of fairness, or with respect for the power of Elisha to bring someone back to life. This was the Shunamite woman whose son Elijah had restored to her. *"The king asked the woman about it, and she told him. Then he assigned an official to her case and said to him, "Give back everything that belonged to her, including all the income from her land from the day she left the country until now."* (2 Kings 8:6).

Then a rather strange story ensues, in which Hazael murders his master, Ben Hadad King of Aram. Ben Hadad is very ill, and sends his servant Hazael to Elisha to see if he will recover or die from his illness. Elijah tells Hazael that the king will recover, but knows (and tells Hazael) that the king- if he lived- would do horrible things to his people: *"You will set fire to their fortified places, kill their young men with the sword, dash their little children to the ground, and rip open their pregnant women."* (2 Kings 8:12b). The Elisha tells Hazael that "The Lord has shown me that you will become king of Aram" (2 Kings 8:13b), and Hazael subsequently murders Ben Hadad.

The Scripture then describes two kings of Judah, Jehoram and Ahaziah. Jehoram did *"evil in the eyes of the Lord"* (2 Kings 8:18b), and Ahaziah (son of Jehoram) was an evil king: "He followed the ways of the house of Ahab and did evil in the eyes of the Lord, as the house of Ahab had done, for he was related by marriage to Ahab's family." Yet God continued to bless His people, even in light of their nearly continuous disobedience. I pray He will do the same for the United States. We certainly do not deserve God's blessings either, but we gratefully receive them!

John 4:31-54

Then Jesus is told to "eat" by His disciples. One wonders if sometimes Jesus was so busy with His Father's work that he often neglected eating. The Jesus explains His source of sustenance: *"But he said to them, "I have food to eat that you know nothing about." Then his disciples said to each other, "Could someone have brought him food?" "My food," said Jesus, "is to do the will of him who sent me and to finish his work. Don't you have a saying, 'It's still four months until harvest'? I tell you, open your eyes and look at the fields! They are ripe for harvest. Even now the one who reaps draws a wage and harvests a crop for eternal life, so that the sower and the reaper may be glad together. Thus the saying 'One sows and another reaps' is true. I sent you to reap what you have not worked for. Others have done the hard work, and you have reaped the benefits of their labor."* (John 4:32-38). Jesus was "feeding" on this same sustenance that He fed on in the 40 day fast in the wilderness. Then He used this moment to teach them- the harvest was "four months" away, but the spiritual harves was plentiful and within their grasp- if they would only see it!

Then Jesus clearly illustrates the power of God's Word- we truly fiund faith by "hearing" (Romans 10:17) and the Samaritans who heard "His words" were convinced that Jesus was the Messiah*: "They said to the woman, "We no longer believe just because of what you said; now we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this man really is the Savior of the world."* (John 4:42) Jesus then revisits Cana in Galilee, where He heals the son of a royal official: *"Once more he visited Cana in Galilee, where he had turned the water into wine. And there was a certain royal official whose son lay sick at Capernaum. When this man heard that Jesus had arrived in Galilee from Judea, he went to him and begged him to come and heal his son, who was close to death. "Unless you people see signs and wonders," Jesus told him, "you will never believe." The royal official said, "Sir, come down before my child dies." "Go," Jesus replied, "your son will live." The man took Jesus at his word and departed."* (John 4:46-50). Jesus demonstrated His power over time and space,

as He does when he healed the Roman centurions' servant (Luke 7:1-10). This act of healing, records John, is the "second sign" that Jesus performed to show His credentials as the Son of God.

2 Kings 9-11 May 14, 2014 John 5:1-24

Annointing, deception, intrigue and murder. Those who maintain theat the Bible has a "sanitized" view of the world and does not present rreal people in real situations with real emotions- and obvious sins and character flaws, has not examoied the Scripture carefully. We have a story that unfolds in 2 Kings in which one king is anointed (Jehu); who kills two other kings (Joram and Ahaziah) the wife of Ahab and Queen (Jezebel), and then slaughters the prophets of Baal and all the family of Ahab. Seems like Jehu is "God's eraser" as he systemmaticaly destroys those evil leaders who reigned in Israel, as well as significant portions of their families. First Jehu is anointed by Elisha: *"Jehu got up and went into the house. Then the prophet poured the oil on Jehu's head and declared, "This is what the Lord, the God of Israel, says: 'I anoint you king over the Lord's people Israel. You are to destroy the house of Ahab your master, and I will avenge the blood of my servants the prophets and the blood of all the Lord's servants shed by Jezebel. The whole house of Ahab will perish. I will cut off from Ahab every last male in Israel—slave or free. I will make the house of Ahab like the house of Jeroboam son of Nebat and like the house of Baasha son of Ahijah. As for Jezebel, dogs will devour her on the plot of ground at Jezreel, and no one will bury her.'" Then he opened the door and ran."* (2 Kings 9:6-10). Then once Jehu's position as king is established and accepted, he kills both Joram (son of Ahab) king of Israel and Ahaziah king of Judah: *"Then Jehu drew his bow and shot Joram between the shoulders. The arrow pierced his heart and he slumped down in his chariot. Jehu said to Bidkar, his chariot officer, "Pick him up and throw him on the field that belonged to Naboth the Jezreelite. Remember how you and I were riding together in chariots behind Ahab his father when the Lord spoke this prophecy against him: 'Yesterday I saw the blood of Naboth and the blood of his sons, declares the Lord, and I will surely make you pay for it on this plot of ground, declares the Lord.' Now then, pick him up and throw him on that plot, in accordance with the word of the Lord."* (2 Kings 9:24-26). Then Ahaziah was also killed: *When Ahaziah king of Judah saw what had happened, he fled up the road to Beth Haggan. Jehu chased him, shouting, "Kill him too!" They wounded him in his chariot on the way up to Gur near Ibleam, but he escaped to Megiddo and died there. His servants took him by chariot to Jerusalem and buried him with his ancestors in his tomb in the City of David. (In the eleventh year of Joram son of Ahab, Ahaziah had become king of Judah.)* (2 Lings 9:27-29). Then Jehu traveled to Jezreel to eliminate the wicked Jezebel: *Then Jehu went to Jezreel. When Jezebel heard about it, she put on eye makeup, arranged her hair and looked out of a window. As Jehu entered the gate, she asked, "Have you come in peace, you Zimri, you murderer of your master?" He looked up at the window and called out, "Who is on my side? Who?" Two or three eunuchs looked down at him. "Throw her down!" Jehu said. So they threw her down, and some of her blood spattered the wall and the horses as they trampled her underfoot. Jehu went in and ate and drank. "Take care of that cursed woman," he said, "and bury her, for she was a king's daughter." But when they went out to bury her, they found nothing except her skull, her feet and her hands. They went back and told Jehu, who said, "This is the word of the Lord that he spoke through his servant Elijah the Tishbite: On the plot of*

ground at Jezreel dogs will devour Jezebel's flesh. Jezebel's body will be like dung on the ground in the plot at Jezreel, so that no one will be able to say, 'This is Jezebel.'" (2 Kings 9:30-37). As grim and barabaric as these killings are, they were used by God to rid His people of the constant evil and "seeking after the Baals" that these evil leaders promoted and represented.

The Death of Jezebel copyright © 2008-2014 by Catriona Mills

And now it was time to eliminate the remaining members of the house of Ahab: *"Now the royal princes, seventy of them, were with the leading men of the city, who were rearing them. When the letter arrived, these men took the princes and slaughtered all seventy of them. They put their heads in baskets and sent them to Jehu in Jezreel. When the messenger arrived, he told Jehu, "They have brought the heads of the princes." Then Jehu ordered, "Put them in two piles at the entrance of the city gate until morning."* (2 Kings 10:6b-8). The rest of Ahab's family and friends fared no better: *"So Jehu killed everyone in Jezreel who remained of the house of Ahab, as well as all his chief men, his close friends and his priests, leaving him no survivor. Jehu then set out and went toward Samaria. At Beth Eked of the Shepherds, he met some relatives of Ahaziah king of Judah and asked, "Who are you?" They said, "We are relatives of Ahaziah, and we have come down to greet the families of the king and of the queen mother." "Take them alive!" he ordered. So they took them alive and slaughtered them by the well of Beth Eked—forty-two of them. He left no survivor. After he left there, he came upon Jehonadab son of Rekab, who was on his way to meet him. Jehu greeted him and said, "Are you in accord with me, as I am with you?" "I am," Jehonadab answered. "If so," said Jehu, "give me your hand." So he did, and Jehu helped him up into the chariot. Jehu said, "Come with me and see my zeal for the Lord." Then he had him ride along in his chariot. When Jehu came to Samaria, he killed all who were left there of Ahab's family; he destroyed them, according to the word of the Lord spoken to Elijah."* (2 Kings 10:11-17). Then the prophets of Baal were next to be destroyed, as Jehu tricked them into gathering for a "great sacrifice" to Baal: *Then Jehu brought all the people together and said to them, "Ahab served Baal a little; Jehu will serve him*

much. Now summon all the prophets of Baal, all his servants and all his priests. See that no one is missing, because I am going to hold a great sacrifice for Baal. Anyone who fails to come will no longer live." But Jehu was acting deceptively in order to destroy the servants of Baal. Jehu said, "Call an assembly in honor of Baal." So they proclaimed it. Then he sent word throughout Israel, and all the servants of Baal came; not one stayed away. They crowded into the temple of Baal until it was full from one end to the other. And Jehu said to the keeper of the wardrobe, "Bring robes for all the servants of Baal." So he brought out robes for them. Then Jehu and Jehonadab son of Rekab went into the temple of Baal. Jehu said to the servants of Baal, "Look around and see that no one who serves the Lord is here with you—only servants of Baal." So they went in to make sacrifices and burnt offerings. Now Jehu had posted eighty men outside with this warning: "If one of you lets any of the men I am placing in your hands escape, it will be your life for his life." As soon as Jehu had finished making the burnt offering, he ordered the guards and officers: "Go in and kill them; let no one escape." So they cut them down with the sword. The guards and officers threw the bodies out and then entered the inner shrine of the temple of Baal. They brought the sacred stone out of the temple of Baal and burned it. They demolished the sacred stone of Baal and tore down the temple of Baal, and people have used it for a latrine to this day. So Jehu destroyed Baal worship in Israel." (2 Kings 10:23-28).

Tragically, after all this slaughter and elimination of the enemies of God, Jehu did not follow God with his whole heart. The sins of the fathers unfortunately strongly influence those of their children, and the power of sin is great without the remedy that we have in Jesus! The Scripture describes it this way: *"However, he did not turn away from the sins of Jeroboam son of Nebat, which he had caused Israel to commit —the worship of the golden calves at Bethel and Dan.*
The Lord said to Jehu, "Because you have done well in accomplishing what is right in my eyes and have done to the house of Ahab all I had in mind to do, your descendants will sit on the throne of Israel to the fourth generation." Yet Jehu was not careful to keep the law of the Lord, the God of Israel, with all his heart. He did not turn away from the sins of Jeroboam, which he had caused Israel to commit." (2 Kings 10:29-31). So as a partial answer to this problem, and as a consequence of this pervasive sin, God reduced the size of Israel (2 Kings 10:32-33), allowing Israels' enemies to retake some of the territory previously lost.

Then the situation actually gets worse- when Athaliah mother of Ahaziah, decided to eliminate all that was left of her son's family so that she could rule unchallenged. Her plot was thwarted by Ahaziah's sister Jehoshabe, who kept Joash, the young son of Ahaziah in a secret place under guard until he was able to take over the role of king*. "When Athaliah the mother of Ahaziah saw that her son was dead, she proceeded to destroy the whole royal family. But Jehosheba, the daughter of King Jehoram and sister of Ahaziah, took Joash son of Ahaziah and stole him away from among the royal princes, who were about to be murdered. She put him and his nurse in a bedroom to hide him from Athaliah; so he was not killed. He remained hidden with his nurse at the temple of the Lord for six years while Athaliah ruled the land."* (2 Kings 10:1-3). Later, after carefully guarding Joash's life and hiding him from his evil grandmother, Jehoida the priest set about to dethrone Athaliah and establish Joash as king. This was done by eliminating Athalia and declaring Joash king, even though he was only seven at the time of his establishment in this role (2

Kings 10:4-21). Joash was to have a key role in the partial restoration of Israel to the true worship of God.(http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jehoash_of_Judah) Unfortunately, the reversion to true worship was only short lived.

John 5:1-24

Bethesda- a city in Maryland where great modern military hospital- Walter Reed- and an ancient town in Israel where a "healing pool" was located. The city of Bethesda was named for the Bethesda Meeting House, a local church. The name "Bethesda" means "house of mercy in Hebrew and "house of healing" in Aramaic. And it was there, in this healing pool, that Jesus performed another miracle, another sign from heaven that he was truly the Son of God. The story unfolds like this*: "Some time later, Jesus went up to Jerusalem for one of the Jewish festivals. Now there is in Jerusalem near the Sheep Gate a pool, which in Aramaic is called Bethesda[a] and which is surrounded by five covered colonnades. Here a great number of disabled people used to lie—the blind, the lame, the paralyzed. One who was there had been an invalid for thirty-eight years. When Jesus saw him lying there and learned that he had been in this condition for a long time, he asked him, "Do you want to get well?" "Sir," the invalid replied, "I have no one to help me into the pool when the water is stirred. While I am trying to get in, someone else goes down ahead of me." Then Jesus said to him, "Get up! Pick up your mat and walk." At once the man was cured; he picked up his mat and walked.*
The day on which this took place was a Sabbath, and so the Jewish leaders said to the man who had been healed, "It is the Sabbath; the law forbids you to carry your mat." But he replied, "The man who made me well said to me, 'Pick up your mat and walk.' " (John 5:1-11) The key verse in this story, to me at least, is verse 5- "Do you want to get well?" Of course, we might answer, anyone in that condition would want to be well, to be whole and independent. Yet Jesus noted that this man had been an invalid thirty eight years, and when asked if he wanted to be made well, started giving his excuses for not being healed. We sometimes do the same. It sometimes seems easier and less demanding to be "ill"and therefore not completely responsible for ourselves, and dependent on others, than to claim both wellness and responsibility.

Then the Pharisees, ever zealous that the letter of the Law be obeyed in all its parts, criticize th healed man for carrying his mat. The man- still in the "excuses" mode- tells them that "the man who made me well" had told him to carry the mat. Then the Pharisees wanted to know who this One was who healed on the Sabbath- when work was strictly forbidden. Jesus had slipped away in the crowd (John 5:13). Then Jesus scolds the man He has just healed*: "See, you are well again. Stop sinning or something worse may happen to you." The man went away and told the Jewish leaders that it was Jesus who had made him well."* (John 5:14b-15). Jesus saw cearly that there were much worse problems than having useless limbs- that of the pervasive sin that affected this man and all "born of woman" (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Original_sin). Then the healed man shows how sinful he still is by going to the authorities and "naming his healer". So instead of gratitude and paise of God the man resorts to blame shifting. His sin, which clearly had grown ugly and bitter during his suffering, was not goiung to be easily removed as his lameness had been.

The Jesus' authority was challenged. Jesus justified His "breaking of the Sabbath" by simply stating: *"My Father is always at his work to this very day, and I too am working."* (John 5:17b). The gospel writer than goes on to explain the hatred of the Pharisses for Jesus:" For this reason they tried all the more to kill him; not only was he breaking the Sabbath, but he was even calling God his own Father, making himself equal with God." (John 5:18). Note that Jesus naturally, and correctly, referred to God as "his Father" and that He was also "working" on the Sabbath. The Pharisees simply could not accept such a statement, for its implications to them were clear- this "country rabbi" was claiming both Sonship and implied equality with God. There was only "one God" and to claim otherwise was pure blasphemy. The prescribed penalty for blasphemy was death! And so they justified themselves and their evil plans.

Then Jesus starts a long testimony, in which He explains and clarifies not only His identity but His mission and calling as the unique God/man on this earth: *"Jesus gave them this answer: "Very truly I tell you, the Son can do nothing by himself; he can do only what he sees his Father doing, because whatever the Father does the Son also does. For the Father loves the Son and shows him all he does. Yes, and he will show him even greater works than these, so that you will be amazed. For just as the Father raises the dead and gives them life, even so the Son gives life to whom he is pleased to give it. Moreover, the Father judges no one, but has entrusted all judgment to the Son, that all may honor the Son just as they honor the Father. Whoever does not honor the Son does not honor the Father, who sent him. "Very truly I tell you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be judged but has crossed over from death to life."* (John 5:19-24) Not only would one who believed Jesus (as evidenced by fruits of a transformed life) have eternal life, but they would not be judged! The Son clearly was a giver of life, and was worthy of the same honor given to God. Heavy and impotant words, but words given in testimony to an unbelieving and critical audience.

2 Kings 12-14 May 15, 2014 John 5:25-47

Six kings- Joash of Judah, Jehoahaz king of Israel, Jehoash king of Israel, Amaziah king of Judah and Jereboam II king of Israel. The kingdom was now established as a divided kingdom, and the general pattern was that the kings of Israel (the ten tribes- the northern part of the original undivided kingdom) were all kings who "did evil" and the kings of Judah (the southern section of the original undivided kingdom) occasionally followed God. The care and concern of God was still for ALL His chosen people, but He allowed other kings and kingdoms to subdue His people to impress on them the necessity of faithfulness to Him. The precedent for this was the captivity in Egypt, where God used the Pharaoh and the "hardness" of Pharaoh's heart to remind the people of their need for God and His protection, deliverance and mercy!

So the summary provided in this section of Scripture, organized by kings, is as follows:

Joash (2 Kings 12), was interested in following and worshiping God, and made significant repairs to the Temple. However, when threatened by an outside enemy, he gave away some of the treasures of the Temple to king Hazael as a "peace offering", showing his lack of trust in God's protection: *"About this time Hazael king of Aram went up and attacked Gath and captured it. Then he turned to attack Jerusalem. **18** But Joash king of Judah took all the sacred objects dedicated by his predecessors—Jehoshaphat, Jehoram and Ahaziah, the kings of Judah—and the gifts he himself had dedicated and all the gold found in the treasuries of the temple of the LORD and of the royal palace, and he sent them to Hazael king of Aram, who then withdrew from Jerusalem."* (2 Kings 12:17-18) He was assassinated by some of his officials: *"His officials conspired against him and assassinated him at Beth Millo, on the road down to Silla. 21 The officials who murdered him were Jozabad son of Shimeath and Jehozabad son of Shomer. He died and was buried with his ancestors in the City of David. And Amaziah his son succeeded him as king."* (2 Kings 12:20-21)

Johoahaz (2 Kings 13:1-9), was interested in God's protection when he was threatened by an outside army, but was typical of the kings of Israel in that he also "did evil". He reigned for seventeen years: *"He did evil in the eyes of the Lord by following the sins of Jeroboam son of Nebat, which he had caused Israel to commit, and he did not turn away from them. So the Lord's anger burned against Israel, and for a long time he kept them under the power of Hazael king of Aram and Ben-Hadad his son. Then Jehoahaz sought the Lord's favor, and the Lord listened to him, for he saw how severely the king of Aram was oppressing Israel. The Lord provided a deliverer for Israel, and they escaped from the power of Aram. So the Israelites lived in their own homes as they had before. But they did not turn away from the sins of the house of Jeroboam, which he had caused Israel to commit; they continued in them. Also, the Asherah pole[d] remained standing in Samaria."* (2 Kings 13:2-6)

Jehoash (2 Kings 13:10-24) had some success in overcoming the outside threat of Hazael and Ben Hadad, his son, who were kings of Aram. During Jehoash's reign, Elisha died from an unspecified illness, and before he died he told Jehoash to shoot arrows from the "east window" of the king's quartes, and then to "strike thr ground" after shooting the arrow: *Now Elisha had been suffering from the illness from which he died. Jehoash king of Israel went down to see him and wept over him. "My father! My father!" he cried. "The chariots and horsemen of Israel!" Elisha said, "Get a bow and some arrows," and he did so. "Take the bow in your hands," he said to the king of Israel. When he had taken it, Elisha put his hands on the king's hands. "Open the east window," he said, and he opened it. "Shoot!" Elisha said, and he shot. "The LORD's arrow of victory, the arrow of victory over Aram!" Elisha declared. "You will completely destroy the Arameans at Aphek." Then he said, "Take the arrows," and the king took them. Elisha told him, "Strike the ground." He struck it three times and stopped. The man of God was angry with him and said, "You should have struck the ground five or six times; then you would have defeated Aram and completely destroyed it. But now you will defeat it only three times." Elisha died and was buried."* (2 Kings 13:14-20) And in exact fulfilment of Elisha's prophesy, Jehoash defeated Ben Hadad three times and successfully recaptured territory from Aram.

Amaziah (2 Kings 14:1-22) who was succeded by his sixteen year old son Azariah, we king of Judah and reigned twenty nine years. He partially followed the Lord's instructions, but not "as his father David had done" (2 Kings 14:3). He did not remove the "high places" where sacrifices were made to other gods (2 Kings 14:4). He did, however, kill the officials who has assassinated his father, but spared the children of these officials: *"After the kingdom was firmly in his grasp, he executed the officials who had murdered his father the king. Yet he did not put the children of the assassins to death, in accordance with what is written in the Book of the Law of Moses where the Lord commanded: "Parents are not to be put to death for their children, nor children put to death for their parents; each will die for their own sin."* (2 Kings 14:5-6). Amaziah foolishly went to war with Israel and king Jehoash of Israel, and his army was routed by Israel*:*
"Amaziah, however, would not listen, so Jehoash king of Israel attacked. He and Amaziah king of Judah faced each other at Beth Shemesh in Judah. Judah was routed by Israel, and every man fled to his home. Jehoash king of Israel captured Amaziah king of Judah, the son of Joash, the son of Ahaziah, at Beth Shemesh. Then Jehoash went to Jerusalem and broke down the wall of Jerusalem from the Ephraim Gate to the Corner Gate—a section about four hundred cubits long. He took all the gold and silver and all the articles found in the temple of the Lord and in the treasuries of the royal palace. He also took hostages and returned to Samaria." (2 Kings 14:11-14) Probably as a rebellion against his foolish and unwise leadership. The people rebelled against Amaziah, tracked him down and killed him. They then replaced him with his son: *"They conspired against him in Jerusalem, and he fled to Lachish, but they sent men after him to Lachish and killed him there. He was brought back by horse and was buried in Jerusalem with his ancestors, in the City of David. Then all the people of Judah took Azariah who was sixteen years old, and made him king in place of his father Amaziah. He was the one who rebuilt Elath and restored it to Judah after Amaziah rested with his ancestors.* (2 Kings 14:19-22).

Jereboam II (2 Kings 14:23-29) is the last king mentioned in 2 Kings 14. He was a "typical" king of Israel in that: *"He did evil in the eyes of the Lord and did not turn away from any of the sins of Jeroboam son of Nebat, which he had caused Israel to commit."* (2 Kings 14:24). God did relent from punishing Israel during this time: *"The Lord had seen how bitterly everyone in Israel, whether slave or free, was suffering; there was no one to help them. And since the Lord had not said he would blot out the name of Israel from under heaven, he saved them by the hand of Jeroboam son of Jehoash." Some of the land was retored to Israel, in accordance with the prophesy of Jonah son of Amittai: "He was the one who restored the boundaries of Israel from Lebo Hamath to the Dead Sea, in accordance with the word of the Lord, the God of Israel, spoken through his servant Jonah son of Amittai, the prophet from Gath Hepher."* (2 Kings 14: 26-27). The records of many of these northern kings are recorded in "the book of the annals of the kings of Israel" (2 Kings 14:28b). See references to these and other "lost" books of the Bible at (http://www.bibleufo.com/anomlostbooks1a.htm).

John 5:25-47

Jesus is clear in His answers to those who objected strenuously to His healing on the Sabbath. It is clear that He represented a threat to them and their position, power

and authority- one simply must look at their responses to His works to see this. They had more fundamental objections to Jesus' ministry than simply His healing- they saw clearly that He represented a radical departure from the "religion" they had so carefully crafted, and His message to them was consistent- you have missed the point of the Law and the prophets. God is really, said Jesus, about relationships, loving and forgiving- not about fastidious adherence to a maze of man made "appendages" to God's Law! Jesus was the true fulfilment of the Law, but His enemies refused to see or accept this kind of fulfilment. Instead of following Him joyfully, they plotted His death! Even though Jesus understtod the threat to Himself posed by these "experts in the Law", he made a steadfast and courageous witness and testimony to them. Whether they liked it or not, or heard it or not, He was determined to tell the truth.

Jesus told them: *"Very truly I tell you, a time is coming and has now come when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God and those who hear will live. For as the Father has life in himself, so he has granted the Son also to have life in himself. And he has given him authority to judge because he is the Son of Man. "Do not be amazed at this, for a time is coming when all who are in their graves will hear his voice and come out—those who have done what is good will rise to live, and those who have done what is evil will rise to be condemned. By myself I can do nothing; I judge only as I hear, and my judgment is just, for I seek not to please myself but him who sent me."* (John 5:25-30). Jesus was also clear about the testimony that had been given to Him: 1) the works themselves that He performed (and that John meticulously catalogued; 2) the testimony of John the Baptists; and 3) the Scriptures themselves. As Jesus told them, Moses (and the other authors of Scripture) pointed to Him- and yet they could neither see not accept this Messiah: " *You study the Scriptures diligently because you think that in them you have eternal life. These are the very Scriptures that testify about me, yet you refuse to come to me to have life. "I do not accept glory from human beings, but I know you. I know that you do not have the love of God in your hearts. I have come in my Father's name, and you do not accept me; but if someone else comes in his own name, you will accept him. How can you believe since you accept glory from one another but do not seek the glory that comes from the only God? "But do not think I will accuse you before the Father. Your accuser is Moses, on whom your hopes are set. If you believed Moses, you would believe me, for he wrote about me. But since you do not believe what he wrote, how are you going to believe what I say?"* (John 5:39-47). Jesus said the problem was that they "do not have the love of God in your hearts"! So the problem is not in the intellect but the heart itself- the truest part of us that God sees so clearly. Until their hearts were changed, they could not see and believe.

2 Kings 15-17 May 16, 2014 John 6:1-21

Nine kings- three from Judah- the southern kingdom, and six from Israel- the northern kingdom. In this section of 2 Kings, Israel's sins are finally so great that God allows Assyria to capture and take Isreal into exile, repopulating the area with: *"people from Babylon, Kuthah, Avva, Hamath and Sepharvaim"* (2 Kings 17:24b). The reason given in Scripture for this exile was: *"The Lord warned Israel and Judah through all his prophets and seers: "Turn from your evil ways. Observe my*

commands and decrees, in accordance with the entire Law that I commanded your ancestors to obey and that I delivered to you through my servants the prophets." But they would not listen and were as stiff-necked as their ancestors, who did not trust in the Lord their God. They rejected his decrees and the covenant he had made with their ancestors and the statutes he had warned them to keep. They followed worthless idols and themselves became worthless. They imitated the nations around them although the Lord had ordered them, "Do not do as they do." They forsook all the commands of the Lord their God and made for themselves two idols cast in the shape of calves, and an Asherah pole. They bowed down to all the starry hosts, and they worshiped Baal. They sacrificed their sons and daughters in the fire. They practiced divination and sought omens and sold themselves to do evil in the eyes of the Lord, arousing his anger. So the Lord was very angry with Israel and removed them from his presence. Only the tribe of Judah was left, and even Judah did not keep the commands of the Lord their God. They followed the practices Israel had introduced. Therefore the Lord rejected all the people of Israel; he afflicted them and gave them into the hands of plunderers, until he thrust them from his presence." (2 Kings 17:13-20). So this stiff-necked, idol worshipping people learned the true meaning of the first commandment "You shall have no other gods before Me" (Exodus 20:3).

Azariah (also referred to as Uzziah) king of Judah was sixteen when he assumed to office of king. He reigned for fifty two years (2 Kings 15:1-7). He "did right" but did not remove the high places of worship. He was afflicted by leprosy: *"The Lord afflicted the king with leprosy until the day he died, and he lived in a separate house. Jotham the king's son had charge of the palace and governed the people of the land."* (2 Kings 15:5). His son Jotham took over most of the day-to-day responsibilities of the king. Azariah was followed by his son Jotham who reigned in Judah for sixteen years (2 Kings 15:32-38). In similar fashion to Azariah, Jothan "did right" but did not remove the high places where pagan worship occurred. Next in Judah was Ahaz, who was twenty when he assumed the role of king, and reigned sixteen years in Judah (2 Kings 16:1-20). Ahaz was an exception to the series of God fearing kimgs in Judah, he "did evil" in the sight of God, even sacrificeing his own son to false idols. He also was attacked by Aram and Israel, under the direction and leadership of king Rezin and Pekah, and sought help from Assyria to overcome these enemies. He offered Tilgath Pliesar the gold and silver from the Temple, and in exchange the king of Assyria: *"complied by attacking Damascus and capturing it. He deported its inhabitants to Kir and put Rezin to death."* (2 Kings 16:9b). Then Ahaz, copying what he had seen in Assyria, made radical changes in the Temple, removing the Sea and Sabbath canopy and tried to copy the place of worship in Assyria (2 Kings 16:17-18).

The kings of Israel were: Zechariah (2 Kings 15:8-12); Shallum (2 Kings 15:13-16); Menahem (2 Kings 15:17-22); Pekahiah (2 Kings 15:23-26); Pekah (2 Kings 15:27-31); and Hoshea, the last king of Israel (2 Kings 17:1-6). There are three notable kings in this succession, all of which "did evil" to various degrees. Zechariah was assassinated by his successor*: "Shallum son of Jabesh conspired against Zechariah. He attacked him in front of the people, assassinated him and succeeded him as king."* (2 Kings 15:10) as was Shallum: *"Then Menahem son of Gadi went from Tirzah up to Samaria. He attacked Shallum son of Jabesh in Samaria, assassinated him and succeeded him as king."* (2 Kings 15:14) I guess the pattern here is "live by

the sword, die by the sword"! The last king of Israel. Hoshea, is also significant in that God had finnaly lost His patience, and Israel had run out of "second chances", so God allowed Assyria to take over and exile the people. Many fear that this will happen to the United States. As we also systematically remove God from scholls and public places, resfuse to listen to Him, and live in constant disobedience to Him- He may someday take his hands off of us and let us reap what we have so generously sowed. My hope is that there is enough of a "faithful remnant" (Malachi 3:16) of God's people that he will spare us and continue His blessings.

2 Kings 17 end with a description of the religious practices of those who had resettled Israel:
"They would not listen, however, but persisted in their former practices. Even while these people were worshiping the Lord, they were serving their idols. To this day their children and grandchildren continue to do as their ancestors did." (2 Kings 17:40-41).

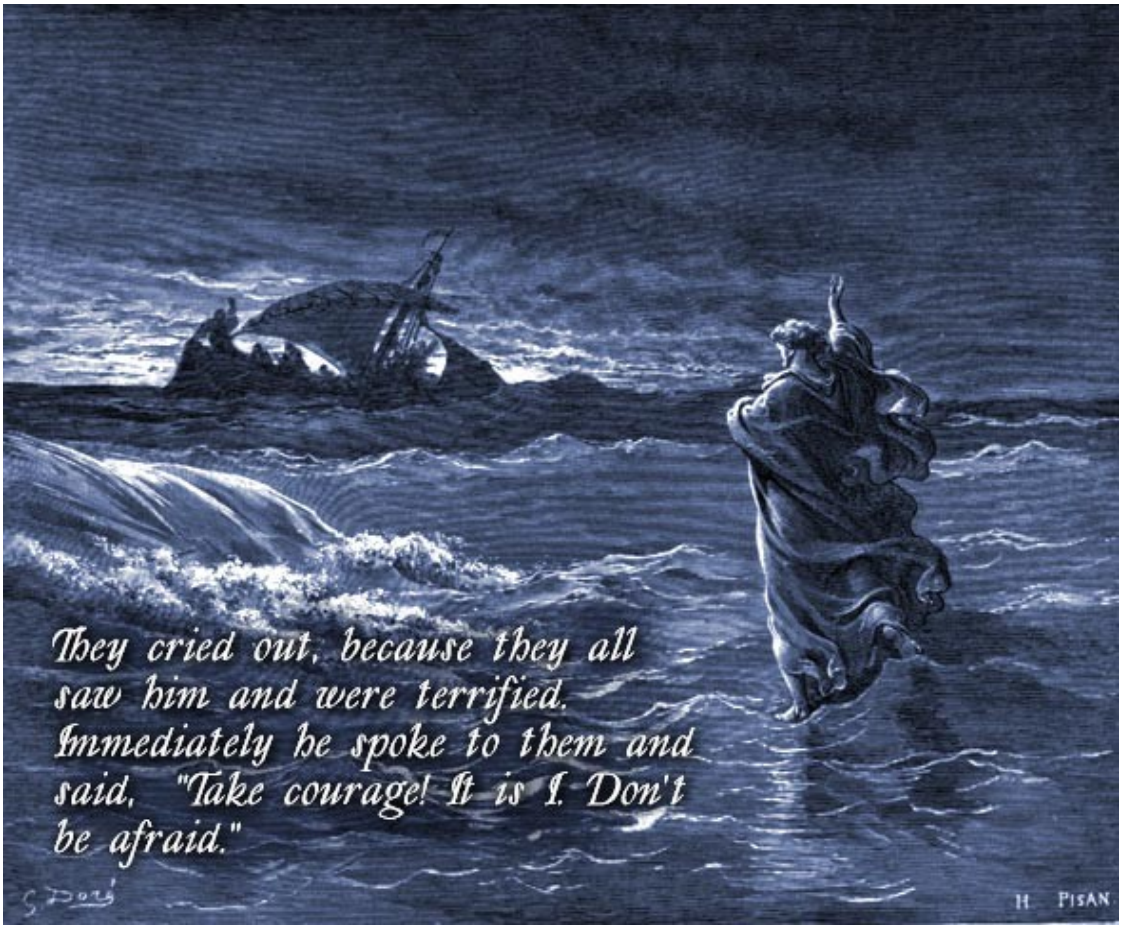
John 6:1-21

Jessu, the very Bread of Life (John 6:35) was about to perform another sign- this time of feeding a multitude. A crowd had gathered as Jesus traveled to the: *"far shore of the Sea of Galilee (that is, the Sea of Tiberias)."* (John 6:1b) They people knew He was capable of healing, and some had heard His teaching, so they were drawn to Him. As they gathered (some five thousand men were anong them), Jesus asked Philip: *"Where shall we buy bread for these people to eat?"* (John 6:5b). But Jesus already knew tha anwer to this question, He was only "testing" Philip (John 6:6). Note that John's gospel attaches references to external events, such that the time span of Jesus' ministry can be estimated. In this case, John notes that: "*The Jewish Passover Festival was near."* (John 6:4) This was the first of three Passovers that spanned Jesus' earthly ministry.

Then Andrew (Simon Peter's brother) said: *"Here is a boy with five small barley loaves and two small fish, but how far will they go among so many?"* (John 6:9). The answer was both immediate and startling: *"Jesus said, "Have the people sit down." There was plenty of grass in that place, and they sat down (about five thousand men were there). Jesus then took the loaves, gave thanks, and distributed to those who were seated as much as they wanted. He did the same with the fish. When they had all had enough to eat, he said to his disciples, "Gather the pieces that are left over. Let nothing be wasted." So they gathered them and filled twelve baskets with the pieces of the five barley loaves left over by those who had eaten. After the people saw the sign Jesus performed, they began to say, "Surely this is the Prophet who is to come into the world." Jesus, knowing that they intended to come and make him king by force, withdrew again to a mountain by himself."* (John 6:10-15)

This sign is then followed by another, on Lake Capernaum. The disciples had launched a small boat, and Jesus had not yet joined them. Then a strong wind blew up, and the disciples were understandable fearful- the water was deep and their boat was small! They had rowed several miles from shore, and then a truly amazing thing happened: *"When they had rowed about three or four miles, they saw Jesus approaching the boat, walking on the water; and they were frightened. But he said*

to them, "It is I; don't be afraid." Then they were willing to take him into the boat, and immediately the boat reached the shore where they were heading." (John 6:19-21)



http://newlife.id.au/bible-study-notes/jesus-walks-on-water-john-614-21/

2 Kings 18-19 May 17, 2014 John 6:22-44

The clash between good and evil- between those who trust in God for everything and those who trust their "gods" has always been the source of drama- not only in biblical times but now also. There is no clearer and more exemplary story of this conflict as the one presented here between King Hezekiah of Judah- lover of God an one who thrusted Him and His protection and provision, and the kings of Assyria- first Shalmanser and then Senacherib. For more information on these two kings, and of Assyria at this time, please see:. (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sennacherib; http://joseph_berrigan.tripod.com/ancientbabylon/id21.html; http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shalmaneser)

The character of Hezekiah is given by the Scripture this way: *"Hezekiah trusted in the Lord, the God of Israel. There was no one like him among all the kings of Judah, either before him or after him. He held fast to the Lord and did not stop following*

him; he kept the commands the Lord had given Moses. And the Lord was with him; he was successful in whatever he undertook. He rebelled against the king of Assyria and did not serve him. From watchtower to fortified city, he defeated the Philistines, as far as Gaza and its territory." (2 Kings 18:5-8)

A succession of Assyrian kings sought to extend their power and sphere of influence into Israel and Judah through military conquest. The first Assyrina king to attack Israel at this time was Shalmaneser: *"In King Hezekiah's fourth year, which was the seventh year of Hoshea son of Elah king of Israel, Shalmaneser king of Assyria marched against Samaria and laid siege to it. At the end of three years the Assyrians took it. So Samaria was captured in Hezekiah's sixth year, which was the ninth year of Hoshea king of Israel. The king of Assyria deported Israel to Assyria and settled them in Halah, in Gozan on the Habor River and in towns of the Medes. This happened because they had not obeyed the Lord their God, but had violated his covenant—all that Moses the servant of the Lord commanded. They neither listened to the commands nor carried them out."* (2 Kings 18:9-12). Ten years later, a successor king Sennacherib attempted to conquer Judah: *"In the fourteenth year of King Hezekiah's reign, Sennacherib king of Assyria attacked all the fortified cities of Judah and captured them. So Hezekiah king of Judah sent this message to the king of Assyria at Lachish: "I have done wrong. Withdraw from me, and I will pay whatever you demand of me." The king of Assyria exacted from Hezekiah king of Judah three hundred talents[c] of silver and thirty talents[d] of gold. So Hezekiah gave him all the silver that was found in the temple of the Lord and in the treasuries of the royal palace. At this time Hezekiah king of Judah stripped off the gold with which he had covered the doors and doorposts of the temple of the Lord, and gave it to the king of Assyria."* (2 Kings 18:13-16). So for a time Hezekiah avoided conquest by Sennacherib by paying tribute to him. However, Sennacherib's ultimate goal wqas to conquer Judah, so he sent his representatives to Hezekiah to make demands. The Assyrina commander was boastful and confident: *"Do not listen to Hezekiah. This is what the king of Assyria says: Make peace with me and come out to me. Then each of you will eat fruit from your own vine and fig tree and drink water from your own cistern, until I come and take you to a land like your own —a land of grain and new wine, a land of bread and vineyards, a land of olive trees and honey. Choose life and not death! "Do not listen to Hezekiah, for he is misleading you when he says, 'The LORD will deliver us.' Has the god of any nation ever delivered his land from the hand of the king of Assyria? Where are the gods of Hamath and Arpad? Where are the gods of Sepharvaim, Hena and Ivvah? Have they rescued Samaria from my hand? Who of all the gods of these countries has been able to save his land from me? How then can theLORD deliver Jerusalem from my hand?"* (2 Kings 18:31-35).

And what was Hezekiah's response to theis threat to himself and his people? Did he cower in fear, beg the king of Assyria for mercy? No- he showed his faith in the deliverance of God by repenting and praying! Here is how the story unfolded, and we are introduced to Isaiah the prophet also at thios point: *"When King Hezekiah heard this, he tore his clothes and put on sackcloth and went into the temple of the Lord. He sent Eliakim the palace administrator, Shebna the secretary and the leading priests, all wearing sackcloth, to the prophet Isaiah son of Amoz. They told him, "This is what Hezekiah says: This day is a day of distress and rebuke and disgrace, as when children come to the moment of birth and there is no strength to*

deliver them. It may be that the Lord your God will hear all the words of the field commander, whom his master, the king of Assyria, has sent to ridicule the living God, and that he will rebuke him for the words the Lord your God has heard. Therefore pray for the remnant that still survives."
When King Hezekiah's officials came to Isaiah, Isaiah said to them, "Tell your master, 'This is what the Lord says: Do not be afraid of what you have heard—those words with which the underlings of the king of Assyria have blasphemed me. Listen! When he hears a certain report, I will make him want to return to his own country, and there I will have him cut down with the sword.'" (2 Kings 19:1-7). And this is the prayer of faith, trust and expectation that Hezekiah prayed: And Hezekiah prayed to the Lord: *"Hezekiah received the letter from the messengers and read it. Then he went up to the temple of the Lord and spread it out before the Lord. "Lord, the God of Israel, enthroned between the cherubim, you alone are God over all the kingdoms of the earth. You have made heaven and earth. Give ear, Lord, and hear; open your eyes, Lord, and see; listen to the words Sennacherib has sent to ridicule the living God. "It is true, Lord, that the Assyrian kings have laid waste these nations and their lands. They have thrown their gods into the fire and destroyed them, for they were not gods but only wood and stone, fashioned by human hands. Now, Lord our God, deliver us from his hand, so that all the kingdoms of the earth may know that you alone, Lord, are God."* (2 Kings 19:14-19). Isaiah told the king of Judah that God had heard his prayer, and he prophesied againt Sennachereb. At the end of his long prophesy Isaiah says (for the Lord):

"'He will not enter this city
or shoot an arrow here.
He will not come before it with shield
or build a siege ramp against it.
By the way that he came he will return;
he will not enter this city,
declares the Lord.
I will defend this city and save it,
for my sake and for the sake of David my servant.'" (2 Kings 19:32-34).

Hezekiah spread the letter before the Lord (2 Kings 19:14). Woodcut by Rudolf Schäfer (1929)

And that is exactly what happened! I wonder sometime why we are so surprised when God acts, especially when he has made it so clear what His plan of action would be, as in this case. The Scripture tells us: *"That night the angel of the Lord went out and put to death a hundred and eighty-five thousand in the Assyrian camp. When the people got up the next morning—there were all the dead bodies! So Sennacherib king of Assyria broke camp and withdrew. He returned to Nineveh and stayed there. One day, while he was worshiping in the temple of his god Nisrok, his sons Adrammelek and Sharezer killed him with the sword, and they escaped to the land of Ararat. And Esarhaddon his son succeeded him as king."* (2 Kings 19:35-37)

John 6:22-44

Jesus has just fed the "five thousand". I imagine He was hoping that his "signs" had been interpreted correctly, and that the people clearly saw God as their Father, provider and protector. However, some were simply seeking a miracle, a provision of bread, or perhaps some other benefit of being near Jesus, so they searched for Him and His followers:

"The next day the crowd that had stayed on the opposite shore of the lake realized that only one boat had been there, and that Jesus had not entered it with his disciples, but that they had gone away alone. Then some boats from Tiberias landed near the place where the people had eaten the bread after the Lord had given thanks. Once the crowd realized that neither Jesus nor his disciples were there, they got into the boats and went to Capernaum in search of Jesus." (John 6:22-24) Did they go to Capernaum hoping to be "fed", or to be healed, or to witness another miracle?

Jesus hoped there was more, and He sought to explain to them and teach them what the true Bread was and is: *"Very truly I tell you, you are looking for me, not because you saw the signs I performed but because you ate the loaves and had your fill. Do not work for food that spoils, but for food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you. For on him God the Father has placed his seal of approval." Then they asked him, "What must we do to do the works God requires?" Jesus answered, "The work of God is this: to believe in the one he has sent." So they asked him, "What sign then will you give that we may see it and believe you? What will you do? Our ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness; as it is written: 'He gave them bread from heaven to eat.'" Jesus said to them, "Very truly I tell you, it is not Moses who has given you the bread from heaven, but it is my Father who gives you the true bread from heaven. For the bread of God is the bread that comes down from heaven and gives life to the world." "Sir," they said, "always give us this bread."*

Then Jesus declared, "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never go hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty. But as I told you, you have seen me and still you do not believe. All those the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never drive away. For I have come down from heaven not to do my will but to do the will of him who sent me. And this is the will of him who sent me, that I shall lose none of all those he has given me, but raise them up at the last day. For my Father's will is that everyone who looks to the Son and believes in him shall have eternal life, and I will raise them up at the last day." (John 6:26b-40). They key teaching here seems to be that Jesus is using these "signs" as a credential, so that the people would accept Him for who He was. He was simply doing the will of "Him who sent Me", and trusting that God's power- through His Son- would "raise them up"- from death to life eternal, from hopelessness to hope, from want to plenty, and from separation by sin to fellowship through forgiveness!

As seemed inevitable, the "Jews" objected to Jesus' teaching. They thought they knew definitively who He was- the son of Joseph- the "local kid"- how could He say He had "come down from heaven"? (John 6:41-42). Jesus gives the perfect reply (as He always did)- *"Stop grumbling among yourselves," Jesus answered. "No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws them, and I will raise them up at the last day."* (John 6:43-44). In thes two sentences Jesus covers amazing ground: 1) He tells them that their "concerns" about Him are simple "grumbling"- they have seen ample evidence of who He was- the signs for one example- and yet instead of believing and following -and thanking God- they passed judgment on Him and complained about His teaching; 2) Jesus explains that God "draws" people to Himself, as a first evidence of prevenient grace and the work of the Holy Spirit. God truly must "pull" on our lives and "draw us out" of ourselves, our prejudices and preoccupations, our false feelings of self importance, our self righteousness, and our insistence on our own way! He must attract us to Himself- and then He starts His wonderful work of "re-creation"!

2 Kings 20-22 May 18, 2014 John 6:45-71

What's in it for me? The question is often asked, and reflects a preoccupation not only with self but with what is "good" for one's own self. Hezekia, despite his otherwise commendable love and trust in God, showed some of this attitude after his miraculous healing. He had become seriously ill, and had prayed to God for healing, reminding God of his faithful service. The prophet Isaiah brought both good and bad news to Hezekiah: The prophet Isaiah son of Amoz went to him and said, *"This is what the LORD says: Put your house in order, because you are going to die; you will not recover." ² Hezekiah turned his face to the wall and prayed to the LORD, "Remember, LORD, how I have walked before you faithfully and with wholehearted devotion and have done what is good in your eyes." And Hezekiah wept bitterly. Before Isaiah had left the middle court, the word of the LORD came to him: "Go back and tell Hezekiah, the ruler of my people,'This is what the LORD, the God of your father David, says: I have heard your prayer and seen your tears; I will heal you. On the third day from now you will go up to the temple of the LORD. I will add fifteen years to your life. And I will deliver you and this city from the hand of the king of Assyria. I will defend this city for my sake and for the sake of my servant David.'"* (2 Kings 20:1b-6). Then Hezekiah asked for a "sign" that his healing was real, and God provided it- the shadow on the steps of the stairway of Ahaz moved backwards ten steps- a small but real miracle! Hezekiah had asked Isaiah, *"What will be the sign that the Lord will heal me and that I will go up to the temple of the Lord on the third day from now?" Isaiah answered, "This is the Lord's sign to you that the Lord will do what he has promised: Shall the shadow go forward ten steps, or shall it go back ten steps?" "It is a simple matter for the shadow to go forward ten steps," said Hezekiah. "Rather, have it go back ten steps." Then the prophet Isaiah called on the Lord, and the Lord made the shadow go back the ten steps it had gone down on the stairway of Ahaz."* (2 Kings 20:8-11).

So now Hezekiah had regained his health, and knew he would live another fifteen years. In the glow of self-satisfaction, he invited envoys from Babylon to view all the finery and possessions that he had in his palace and storerooms. When questioned about this by Isaiah, he reported that he had shown them "everything". Isaiah sternly warned Hezekiah that this would lead to disaster for Judah and for Hezekiah's successors. His attitude was *""The word of the Lord you have spoken is good," Hezekiah replied. For he thought, "Will there not be peace and security in my lifetime?"* (2 Kings 20:19) Hezekiah had assurance that his life was good, and he seemed to care very little or at all about what would happen after that!

Two kings follow Hezekiah- both evil. The first was Manasseh, who exceeded the evil be fore him, even to the point of sacrificing his own sons to the "starry hosts" of heaven: *"Manasseh was twelve years old when he became king, and he reigned in Jerusalem fifty-five years. His mother's name was Hephzibah. He did evil in the eyes of the Lord, following the detestable practices of the nations the Lord had driven out before the Israelites. He rebuilt the high places his father Hezekiah had destroyed; he also erected altars to Baal and made an Asherah pole, as Ahab king of Israel had done. He bowed down to all the starry hosts and worshiped them. He built altars in the temple of the Lord, of which the Lord had said, "In Jerusalem I will put my Name." In the two courts of the temple of the Lord, he built altars to all the starry hosts. He sacrificed his own son in the fire, practiced divination, sought omens, and consulted mediums and spiritists. He did much evil in the eyes of the Lord, arousing his anger."* (2 Kings 21:1-6). He was followed by Amon, who was

assassinated after a reign of two years: *Amon was twenty-two years old when he became king, and he reigned in Jerusalem two years. His mother's name was Meshullemeth daughter of Haruz; she was from Jotbah. He did evil in the eyes of the Lord, as his father Manasseh had done. He followed completely the ways of his father, worshiping the idols his father had worshiped, and bowing down to them. He forsook the Lord, the God of his ancestors, and did not walk in obedience to him. Amon's officials conspired against him and assassinated the king in his palace. Then the people of the land killed all who had plotted against King Amon, and they made Josiah his son king in his place."* (2 Kings 21:19-24).

Then we see Josiah, the "boy king" who made a concerted effort to restore the true faith of Israel. It is remarkable that a child would be such an exemplary leader, but as Isaiah was to say later *"a little child shall lead them"* (Isaiah 11:6). When the work on repair and restoration of the Temple was taking place, the Book of the Law was discovered. This precious document contained the descriptions and details of the worship and sacrificial pattermns that were to be followed, as well as listings and regulations for holy days of observance. These practices had not been a part of the religious life of God's people for many years. *Hilkiah the high priest said to Shaphan the secretary, "I have found the Book of the Law in the temple of the LORD." He gave it to Shaphan, who read it. Then Shaphan the secretary went to the king and reported to him: "Your officials have paid out the money that was in the temple of the LORD and have entrusted it to the workers and supervisors at the temple." Then Shaphan the secretary informed the king, "Hilkiah the priest has given me a book." And Shaphan read from it in the presence of the king. When the king heard the words of the Book of the Law, he tore his robes. He gave these orders to Hilkiah the priest, Ahikam son of Shaphan, Akbor son of Micaiah, Shaphan the secretary and Asaiah the king's attendant: "Go and inquire of the LORD for me and for the people and for all Judah about what is written in this book that has been found. Great is the LORD's anger that burns against us because those who have gone before us have not obeyed the words of this book; they have not acted in accordance with all that is written there concerning us."* (2 Kings 22:8-13) God told Josiah through the prophetess Hulda that: *'This is what the LORD, the God of Israel, says concerning the words you heard: Because your heart was responsive and you humbled yourself before the LORD when you heard what I have spoken against this place and its people—that they would become a curse and be laid waste—and because you tore your robes and wept in my presence, I also have heard you, declares the LORD. Therefore I will gather you to your ancestors, and you will be buried in peace. Your eyes will not see all the disaster I am going to bring on this place.'"* (2 Kings 22:18b-20). So Josiah searched his heart for an appropriate response to the harsh words that God had sent thought His prophetess. His answer, which we will see in 2 Kings 23, was to "1) read the entire Law in the hearing of the people, and 2) have the people re-commit to the coveneat that God had established with them.

John 6:45-71

Disciples, and potential disciples, sometimes struggle with "hard teachings". Jesus never watered down or minimized the real and sometime very difficult demands

that go with being a true disciple of His. So when Jesus explained that he was the gateway to the Kingdom of God, and the only gateway, some objected. And as was (and is) inevitable, some dropped away from following Jesus. His yoke is truly ‘easy” and His burden “light” (Matthew 11:30), but some find it overwhelming and (seemingly) untenable. Just after Jesus states that he is the Bread of Life, He then expands and explains that his followerd must “partake” of his very flesh and blood to truly be part of Him. To some, this was very confusing and disturbing: “ *I am the bread of life. Your ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness, yet they died. But here is the bread that comes down from heaven, which anyone may eat and not die. I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats this bread will live forever. This bread is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world.” Then the Jews began to argue sharply among themselves, “How can this man give us his flesh to eat?”* (John 6: 48-52) This would seem to be both impossible and disgusting…yet on closer examination Jesus seems to be saying that those who truly follow Him must have an intimacy with Him (and with His Father) that is unprecedented.

Some excerpts from commentary seem appropriate here (http://www.biblegateway.com/resources/commentaries/IVP-NT/John/Jesus-Reveals-Himself-Bread):

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What sort of bread could give eternal life? Jesus' teaching comes to a head as he declares, *This bread is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world* (v. 51). The Word that became flesh (1:14) now says he will give his flesh for the life of the world, so that the world may have life. Giving of life to the world (v. 33) requires that he give his flesh. This giving is in the future, so it refers to more than his teaching. It is also on behalf of *(hyper)* the life of the world, which suggests sacrifice (see comment on 10:11). Christ's death is indeed a sacrifice on behalf of his flock (10:11, 15), the Jewish people (11:50-51), the nations (11:52) and his disciples (17:19; cf. Beasley-Murray 1987:94).

This crowd has now received the interpretation of the sign as they had requested (6:30). Earlier the Jews had asked for a sign to legitimate Jesus' action in the temple, and he had spoken of the temple of his body and of his death and resurrection (2:18-21). Now this crowd has received teaching about the manna of his flesh and about how the divine gift of eternal life will be given through the Messiah's death. Here is a cryptic saying indeed! His reference to his flesh only heightens the scandal, as we see in the next scene.Jesus Deepens the Scandal: Eat My Flesh, Drink My Blood (6:52-59) When Jesus mentions his flesh, the tension in the crowd increases. The people are not just grumbling (v. 41); they are arguing sharply with one another (v. 52). Once again we see people who come to Jesus as a rabbi, who even wanted to make him king, but who are far from treating him as either a king or a rabbi. They are not receiving his teaching, as cryptic and offensive as it is. Like Nicodemus, they can only ask how such a thing can be (v. 52; cf. 3:9). "When questioning concerning the `how' comes in, there comes in with it unbelief" (Chrysostom *In John* 46.2). And Jesus does not make it easy for them. He now makes sure they get the point that real eating and drinking are involved. As he

deepens the offense in these verses, he also explains in a very profound way the eternal life he is offering.

Jesus begins by revealing more sharply our need of the life he offers: *I tell you the truth, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you* (v. 53). He claims that the life he is talking about is not merely some optional gift that we can afford to ignore. Apart from the life he offers, we are dead. Here is a claim as demanding as are his earlier claims about his own identity and what he offers to those who believe in him (vv. 30-51). Our utter neediness is seen clearly when set against the greatness of his offer: *Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day* (v. 54). Jesus is promising a new quality of life now and resurrection in the future.

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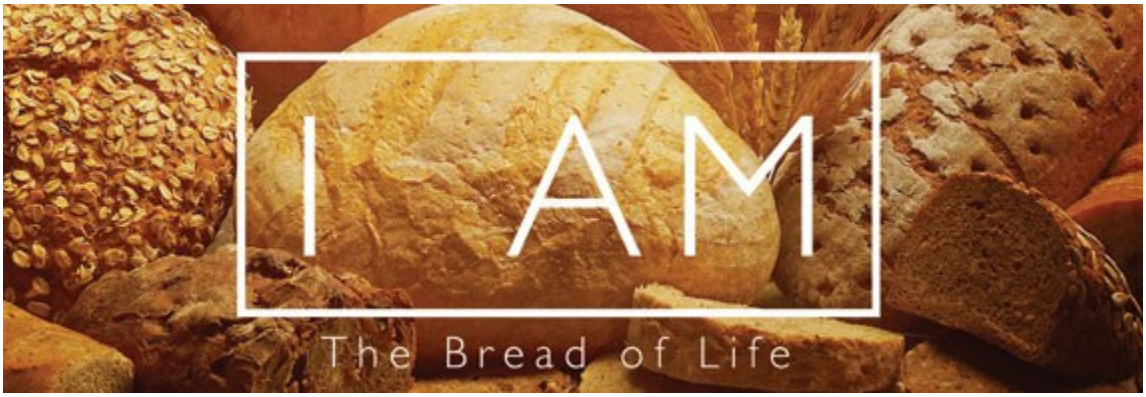
Some of Jesus' disciples grumble among themselves that this cryptic message is "too hard" for them to grasp, let alone follow. And yet Jesus made this demand- and makes it today- to His followers: *"On hearing it, many of his disciples said, "This is a hard teaching. Who can accept it?" Aware that his disciples were grumbling about this, Jesus said to them, "Does this offend you? Then what if you see the Son of Man ascend to where he was before! The Spirit gives life; the flesh counts for nothing. The words I have spoken to you—they are full of the Spirit[e] and life. Yet there are some of you who do not believe."For Jesus had known from the beginning which of them did not believe and who would betray him. He went on to say, "This is why I told you that no one can come to me unless the Father has enabled them." From this time many of his disciples turned back and no longer followed him."* (John 6:60-66). The falling away is so obvious and so narly complete that Jesus asks the twelve if they too, will desert Him. He then reveals that He already knows that one of them will betray Him: *"You do not want to leave too, do you?" Jesus asked the Twelve. Simon Peter answered him, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and to know that you are the Holy One of God." Then Jesus replied, "Have I not chosen you, the Twelve? Yet one of you is a devil!" (He meant Judas, the son of Simon Iscariot, who, though one of the Twelve, was later to betray him.)* (John 6:67-71)



http://www.lifeillinois.org/i-am-the-bread-of-life/

2 Kings 23-25 May 19, 2014 John 7:1-31

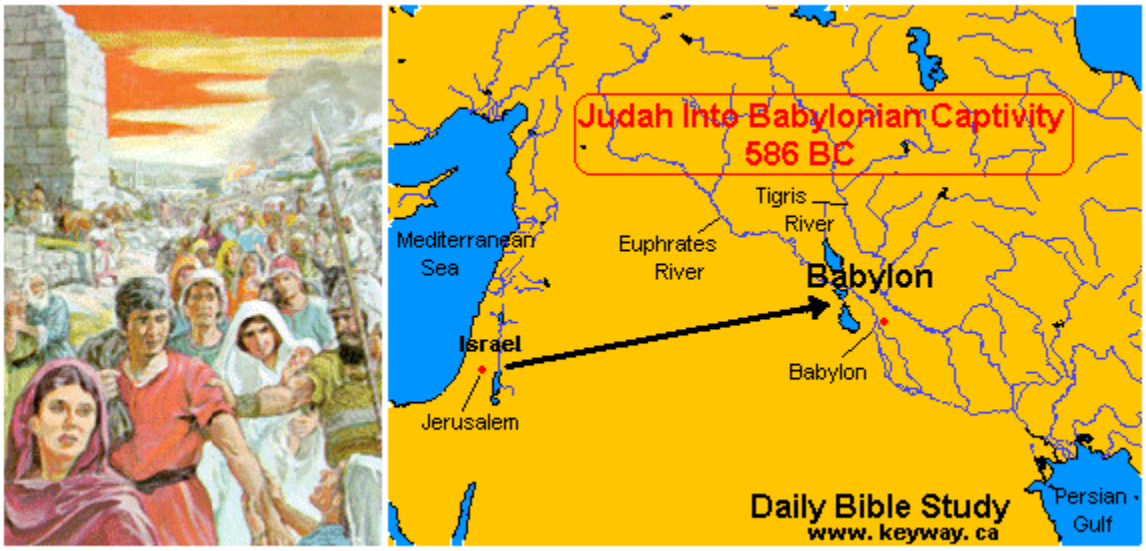
From the highest- worship and praise of God- and following His commands with joy- to the lowest- rejection of God, insistence on one's own way. From prosperity, safety and peace to war, invasion and exile- this is the span of events and emotions in the last three chapters of 2 Kings. The beginning is very hopeful- Josiah has discovered the Law, hidden for years in the Temple ruins, repents and weeps and reads the Law in front of the collected people- who then re-commit themselves to God's covenant with them: *"Then the king called together all the elders of Judah and Jerusalem. He went up to the temple of the Lord with the people of Judah, the inhabitants of Jerusalem, the priests and the prophets—all the people from the least to the greatest. He read in their hearing all the words of the Book of the Covenant, which had been found in the temple of the Lord. The king stood by the pillar and renewed the covenant in the presence of the Lord—to follow the Lord and keep his commands, statutes and decrees with all his heart and all his soul, thus confirming the words of the covenant written in this book. Then all the people pledged themselves to the covenant."* (2 Kings 23:1-3). Actions consistent with this re-commitment to God's covenant followed- the high places were destroyed (finally), the pagan altars removed, and the quarters for the shrine prostitues were destroyed (2 Kings 23:4-15). Only the bones of the "prophet from Samaria" and the man who spoke out against the altar at Bethel were spared (2 Kings 23:16-18). Finally he slaughtered the priests of the false gods (2 Kings 23:20). Josiah re-established the Passover and other sacred feasts and days, and removed the spiritists from his kingdom (2 Kings 23:21-25).

The nation had gone too far- there was now a consequence for the many years of disobedience by Judah. In spite of Josiah's passion, his desire to right the wrongs of previous kings, and despite his re-institution of the Law, God's anger still "burned" against His rebellious people (2 Kings 23:26-27). So Pharaoh Necho of Egypt, who was enlisting the help of Assyria to fight against Judah, killed Josiah at Megiddo and his body was brought back to Jerduaslem. His son Jehoahaz then succeeded Josiah: *"While Josiah was king, Pharaoh Necho king of Egypt went up to the Euphrates River to help the king of Assyria. King Josiah marched out to meet him in battle, but Necho faced him and killed him at Megiddo. Josiah's servants brought his body in a chariot from Megiddo to Jerusalem and buried him in his own tomb. And the people of the land took Jehoahaz son of Josiah and anointed him and made him king in place of his father."* (2 Kings 23:29-30) Jehoahaz was an "evil" king, and was kept in captivity and economic slavery by the Pharaoh: *"He did evil in the eyes of the Lord, just as his predecessors had done. Pharaoh Necho put him in chains at Riblah in the land of Hamath so that he might not reign in Jerusalem, and he imposed on Judah a levy of a hundred talents of silver and a talent of gold. Pharaoh Necho made Eliakim son of Josiah king in place of his father Josiah and changed Eliakim's name to Jehoiakim. But he took Jehoahaz and carried him off to Egypt, and there he died. Jehoiakim paid Pharaoh Necho the silver and gold he demanded. In order to do so, he taxed the land and exacted the silver and gold from the people of the land according to their assessments."* (2 Kings 23:32-35) Johoiakim was subsequently invaded by Babylon, and he became the "puppet king" of his foreign masters: "*During Jehoiakim's reign, Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon invaded the land, and Jehoiakim became his vassal for three years. But then he turned against Nebuchadnezzar and rebelled. The Lord sent Babylonian, Aramean, Moabite and Ammonite raiders against him to destroy Judah, in accordance with the word of the Lord proclaimed by his servants the prophets. Surely these things happened to*

Judah according to the Lord's command, in order to remove them from his presence because of the sins of Manasseh and all he had done, including the shedding of innocent blood. For he had filled Jerusalem with innocent blood, and the Lord was not willing to forgive." (2 Kings 23:36-24:4) The Scripture writer seems to blame Manasseh for all this tragedy….surely there were others whose disobedience merited this kind of punishment!

Jehoiachin, Jehoakim's son, was the next successor to the throne. He "did evil", and was forced to surrender to Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon. (2 Kings 24:8-16) Jehoiachin's uncle Mattaniah was made king, and Nebuchadnezzar changed his name to Zedekiah. (2 Kings 24:17) Zedekiah was no better than his father, but he eventually rebelled against Babylon: *"Zedekiah was twenty-one years old when he became king, and he reigned in Jerusalem eleven years. His mother's name was Hamutal daughter of Jeremiah; she was from Libnah. He did evil in the eyes of the Lord, just as Jehoiakim had done. It was because of the Lord's anger that all this happened to Jerusalem and Judah, and in the end he thrust them from his presence.*

Now Zedekiah rebelled against the king of Babylon." (2 Kings 24:18-20) From the ninth to eleventh year of Zedekiah's reign, the Babylonians laid siege to Jerusalem, ultimately breahing the walls and taking Zedekiah captive: *"So in the ninth year of Zedekiah's reign, on the tenth day of the tenth month, Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon marched against Jerusalem with his whole army. He encamped outside the city and built siege works all around it. The city was kept under siege until the eleventh year of King Zedekiah. By the ninth day of the fourth] month the famine in the city had become so severe that there was no food for the people to eat. Then the city wall was broken through, and the whole army fled at night through the gate between the two walls near the king's garden, though the Babylonians were surrounding the city. They fled toward the Arabah, but the Babylonian army pursued the king and overtook him in the plains of Jericho. All his soldiers were separated from him and scattered, and he was captured. He was taken to the king of Babylon at Riblah, where sentence was pronounced on him. They killed the sons of Zedekiah before his eyes. Then they put out his eyes, bound him with bronze shackles and took him to Babylon."* (2 Kings 25:1-7) The temple was then destroyed by fire, and may of the people taken into captivity in Babylon. The Babylonian captivity was to be a period of distress, repentance and reflection for God' people. They saw that God allowed foreign powers to have rule over them, and to exact punishment on them as a consequence of their sinful behavior as a people. It would be thousands of years before there was another nation of Israel!



Later, when the king of Babylon was succeeded by Awel-Marduk, Jehoichin was freed from jail and given a place at the kings's table*: "In the thirty-seventh year of the exile of Jehoiachin king of Judah, in the year Awel-Marduk became king of Babylon, he released Jehoiachin king of Judah from prison. He did this on the twenty-seventh day of the twelfth month. He spoke kindly to him and gave him a seat of honor higher than those of the other kings who were with him in Babylon. So Jehoiachin put aside his prison clothes and for the rest of his life ate regularly at the king's table. Day by day the king gave Jehoiachin a regular allowance as long as he lived."* (2 Kings 25:27-30)

John 7:1-31

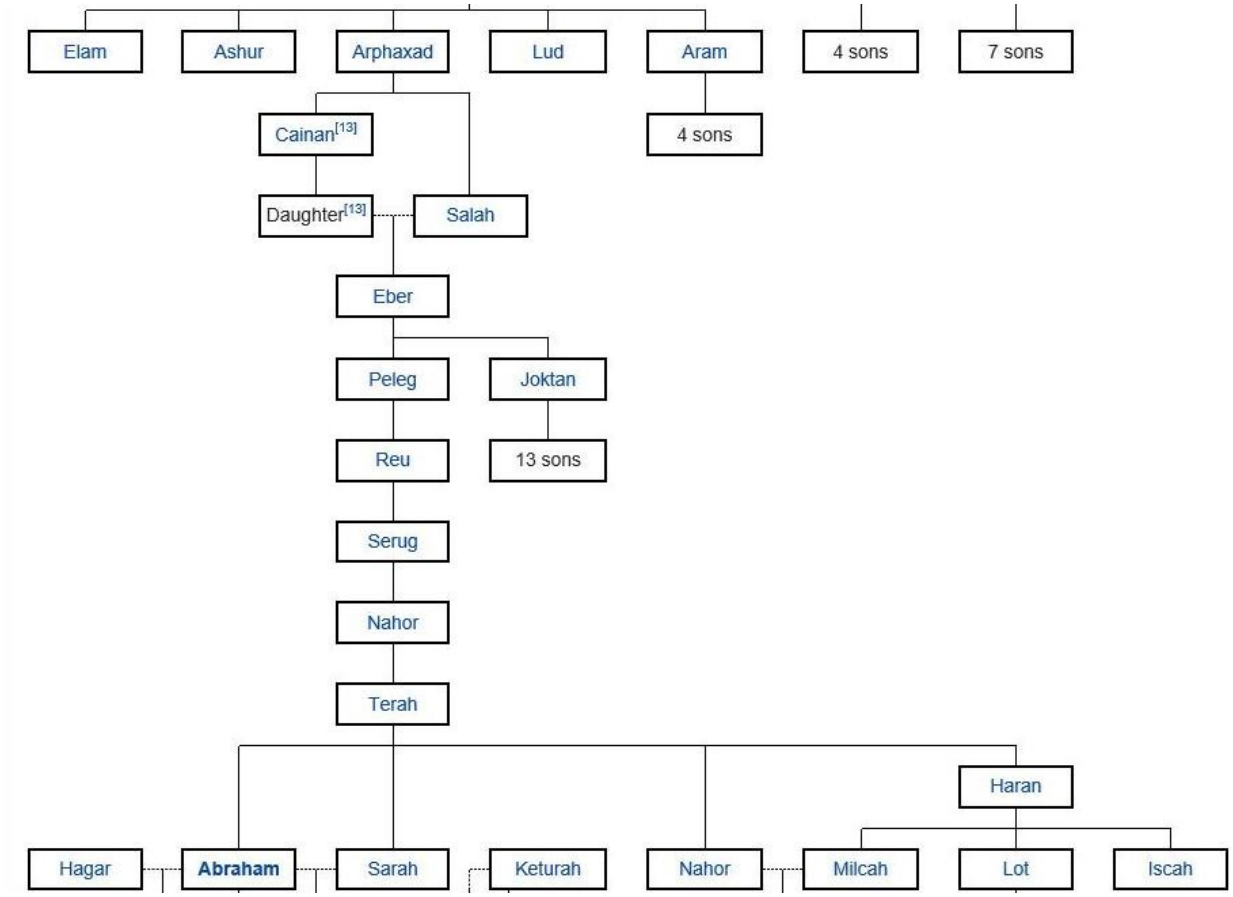
There was a delicate balance between the "public" and "private" Jesus. Because of His courageous truth telling, Jesus had already accumulated detractors and outright enemies. He had to be very wise, and filled with the Spirit, before deciding to "go public". John's gospel presents an interesting comment about the "timing" of Jesus public ministry. Jesus hesitated to appear in Judea, but instead stayed for a while in Galilee, avoiding the Festival of Tabernacles in Judea: *"Therefore Jesus told them, "My time is not yet here; for you any time will do. The world cannot hate you, but it hates me because I testify that its works are evil. You go to the festival. I am not going up to this festival, because my time has not yet fully come." After he had said this, he stayed in Galilee."* (John 7:6-9). Notice that Jesus is hesistant and states that "my time is not yet here", very similar to His hesitance to perform His first miracle at the wedding in Cana of Galilee (John 2:1). Yet eventually Jesus did appear at the festival, although he went "in secret" (John 7:10). And the Jewish leaders were looking for Him *"Now at the festival the Jewish leaders were watching for Jesus and asking, "Where is he?"* (John 7:11). Already some were saying *"He deceives the people"*, although some said *"He is a good man"* (John 7:12). It is very likely that Jesus was indifferent to the praise or criticism of "the crowd".

Jesus did finally teach, and surprised many since he was not “educated”. His words showed some frustration at the unwillingness of His own people to recognize Him and follow Him: *“My teaching is not my own. It comes from the one who sent me. Anyone who chooses to do the will of God will find out whether my teaching comes from God or whether I speak on my own. Whoever speaks on their own does so to gain personal glory, but he who seeks the glory of the one who sent him is a man of truth; there is nothing false about him. Has not Moses given you the law? Yet not one of you keeps the law. Why are you trying to kill me?”* (John 7:16-19) And the debate about who Jesus is began, and continues to this day. Some could not believe at all, some hated Him for personal reasons or because His words shamed them and exposed their sins, and some simply demanded “more miracles and signs” of Him: *“At that point some of the people of Jerusalem began to ask, “Isn’t this the man they are trying to kill? Here he is, speaking publicly, and they are not saying a word to him. Have the authorities really concluded that he is the Messiah? But we know where this man is from; when the Messiah comes, no one will know where he is from.” Then Jesus, still teaching in the temple courts, cried out, “Yes, you know me, and you know where I am from. I am not here on my own authority, but he who sent me is true. You do not know him, but I know him because I am from him and he sent me.” At this they tried to seize him, but no one laid a hand on him, because his hour had not yet come. Still, many in the crowd believed in him. They said, “When the Messiah comes, will he perform more signs than this man?”* (John 7:25-31). Certainly one of the most important questosn we can ask today is *“Who do you say that I am?”* (Matthew 16:15; Mark 8:29, Luke 9:20). The answer to this question is an indicator of who we hold to be most dear and real in our lives!

1 Chronicles 1-2 May 20, 2014 John 7:32-53

Genealogy- a hobby for some, but very serious business for God’s people. They believed- and still believe- that their bloodline and their unique line of physical descent is important in maintaining a people who are paradoxically “set apart” but set apart to be a light and blessing to the nations. And so 1 Chronicles begins with the record of the blood line from Adam to Abram. Noah’s sons Ham, Shem and Japheth are listed in 1 Chronicles 1:4- these became the ancestors of the semitic people- Shem, the persons of color- Ham, and the European peoples- Japheth.(http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shem; http://israelect.com/reference/WillieMartin/Japeth%20and%20Ham%20[A].htm)

The descendants of these three sons are listed; Japhethites (1 Chron. 1:5-7); the Hamites (1 Chron. 1:6-15), and finally the Semites (1 Chron. 1:17-27). Most significant in Hebrew history is Arphaxad, father of Eber and Peleg, Peleg father of Terah, Terah father of Abram/Abraham. Abram then, late in life was the father of both Ishmael and Isaac, Isaac the fther of Esau and Jacob, and Jacob the patriarch of the twelve brothers who became the twelve tribes of Israel.



Taken from http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Abraham's_family_tree#Family_tree

The Scripture lists the sons of Jacob/Israel as follows: “These were the sons of Israel: Reuben, Simeon, Levi, Judah, Issachar, Zebulun, 2 Dan, Joseph, Benjamin, Naphtali, Gad and Asher. (2 Chron. 2:1) Later in the Scripture, the identities of these tribes becomes somewhat tangled, not to mention the fact that ten of the tribes were “lost”- the records of their genaology were presumably lost. The list at the Jewish Virtual Library (http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/Judaism/tribes.html) is not identical to the one given here in 1 Chronicles 2 : “The twelve tribes are as follows: Reuben, Simeon, Judah, Issachar, Zebulun, Benjamin, Dan, Naphtali, Gad, Asher, Ephraim and Manasseh.” The breakdown is as follows alphabetically:

1 Chronicles 2	**Jewish Virtual Library**
Asher	Asher
Benjamin	Benjamin
Dan	Dan
Gad	Gad
Issachar	Issachar
Joseph	NO (replaced with Ephriam and Manasseh)
Judah	Judah
Levi	NO
Naphtali	Naphtali
Reuben	Reuben

Simeon	Simeon
Zebulon	Zebulon

John 7:32-53

So who was this Jesus, and by what authority did He preach? These questions and other related ones swirled about the public appearances of Jesus. One the one hand were the "experts", who had just sent the Temple guards to arrest Jesus (John 7:32). Jesus boldly stated: *"I am with you for only a short time, and then I am going to the one who sent me. You will look for me, but you will not find me; and where I am, you cannot come." (John 7:33b-34).* Then the Jews were confused and asked each other questions about this One: *"The Jews said to one another, "Where does this man intend to go that we cannot find him? Will he go where our people live scattered among the Greeks, and teach the Greeks? What did he mean when he said, 'You will look for me, but you will not find me,' and 'Where I am, you cannot come'?"* (John 7:35-36)

Then Jesus made a strong, startling and important statement- He invited all of those in His hearing to follow Him: *"On the last and greatest day of the festival, Jesus stood and said in a loud voice, "Let anyone who is thirsty come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as Scripture has said, rivers of living water will flow from within them." By this he meant the Spirit, whom those who believed in him were later to receive. Up to that time the Spirit had not been given, since Jesus had not yet been glorified. On hearing his words, some of the people said, "Surely this man is the Prophet." Others said, "He is the Messiah." Still others asked, "How can the Messiah come from Galilee? Does not Scripture say that the Messiah will come from David's descendants and from Bethlehem, the town where David lived?" Thus the people were divided because of Jesus. Some wanted to seize him, but no one laid a hand on him."* (John 7:37-44) Notice that no one laid a hand on Him- His time had not yet come to be arrested and given a mock trial. Jesus was inclusive- "whoever" and "anyone" were welcome to come and receive living water that would quench their thirst eternally!

And the "experts" found a way to discredit Jesus, by alluding that no one of importance ever came –or would come- from Galilee (John 7:52). Their contempt and disregard of Jesus blinded them to the history of the prophets. At least two prophets had indeed come from Galilee- Jonah and Elijah (http://christiananswers.net/dictionary/galilee.html).

1 Chronicles 3-5 May 21, 2014 John 8:1-20

The "chronicler" sets out to record the lines of descent of Israel in the early part of this book. In these three chapters we see: 1) the sons of David (1 Chron. 3:1-9); 2) the kings of Judah (1 Chron. 3:10-16); 3) the kings after the exile (1 Chron. 3:17-24); 4) the descendants of Judah (1 Chron. 4:1-23) including Jabez, whose prayer was recently popularized (1 Chron. 4:9-10): *"Jabez was more honorable than his brothers. His mother had named him Jabez,[h] saying, "I gave birth to him in pain." Jabez cried out to the God of Israel, "Oh, that you would bless me and enlarge my territory! Let your hand be with me, and keep me from harm so that I will be free from pain." And God granted his request."*; 5) the descendants of Simeon (1 Chron.

4:24-43); 6) the descendants of Reuben (1 Chon. 5:1-10); 6) the descendants of Gad (2 Chron. 5: 11-22; and last 7) the half tribe of Manasseh (2 Chron 5:23-26).

The story of the half tribe of Manasseh is representative of the story of the northern tribes (all those except Judah) that comprised Israel after the division of the kingdom. The people rejected God, and God allowed a foreign power to take them into exile: *The people of the half-tribe of Manasseh were numerous; they settled in the land from Bashan to Baal Hermon, that is, to Senir (Mount Hermon). These were the heads of their families: Epher, Ishi, Eliel, Azriel, Jeremiah, Hodaviah and Jahdiel. They were brave warriors, famous men, and heads of their families. But they were unfaithful to the God of their ancestors and prostituted themselves to the gods of the peoples of the land, whom God had destroyed before them. So the God of Israel stirred up the spirit of Pul king of Assyria (that is, Tiglath-Pileser king of Assyria), who took the Reubenites, the Gadites and the half-tribe of Manasseh into exile. He took them to Halah, Habor, Hara and the river of Gozan, where they are to this day.* (1 Chron. 5:23-26).

According to Wikipedia: "Chronicles appears to be largely the work of a single individual, with some later additions and editing. The anonymous author was probably male, probably a Levite (temple priest), and probably from Jerusalem. He was well read, a skilled editor, and a sophisticated theologian. His intention was to use Israel's past to convey religious messages to his peers, the literary and political elite of Jerusalem in the time of the Persian empire. God, the author tells his audience, guides history, and has chosen Israel for his purposes." (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Books_of_Chronicles)

John 8:1-20

John 8:1-11 and John 7:53 are not included in the earliest manuscripts. They may have been added later. According to the Bible Gateway "A few manuscripts include these verses, wholly or in part, after John 7:36, John 21:25, Luke 21:38 or Luke 24:53."

The story in John 8:1-11 is of interest not only because it seems to be a "later" addition to the gospel, but also because it contains the only record of Jesus writing something- in this case with His finger in the dirt. The woman accused of adultery is brought to Jesus, at least partly to test Him and see if He agrees with the Law. Instead of abiding by the "surface" of the Law, he asks a deeper question- which among us is without sin, and would (by implication) be righteous enough to condemn another. When the accusers and potyential executioners were forced to look at this truth, they left:: *But Jesus bent down and started to write on the ground with his finger. When they kept on questioning him, he straightened up and said to them, "Let any one of you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her." Again he stooped down and wrote on the ground. At this, those who heard began to go away one at a time, the older ones first, until only Jesus was left, with the woman still standing there. Jesus straightened up and asked her, "Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?" "No one, sir," she said.*
"Then neither do I condemn you," Jesus declared. "Go now and leave your life of sin." (John 8:6-11). Notice that Jesus clearly does not condone her sin, but does not

condemn her, the sinner. She does not get a blanket pardon for this and all future sins- Jesus clearly tells her to “leave your life of sin”.

Jesus’ testimony about Himself is then questioned. Jesus clearly states that he and the Father are working in concert. The strategy of the Pharisees here sees to discredit Jesus as having only testified about Himself. Jesus, however, cleverly uses the Law- and its rule about the testimony of two witnesses, to affirm His claims. As Jesus says, both He and the Father testify to the truth Jesus is saying and to His claims about Himself, therefore by the Law these claims are valid: *“When Jesus spoke again to the people, he said, “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.” The Pharisees challenged him, “Here you are, appearing as your own witness; your testimony is not valid.” Jesus answered, “Even if I testify on my own behalf, my testimony is valid, for I know where I came from and where I am going. But you have no idea where I come from or where I am going. You judge by human standards; I pass judgment on no one. But if I do judge, my decisions are true, because I am not alone. I stand with the Father, who sent me. In your own Law it is written that the testimony of two witnesses is true. I am one who testifies for myself; my other witness is the Father, who sent me.” Then they asked him, “Where is your father?” You do not know me or my Father,” Jesus replied. “If you knew me, you would know my Father also.” He spoke these words while teaching in the temple courts near the place where the offerings were put. Yet no one seized him, because his hour had not yet come.”* (John 8:12-20) Notice that “no one seized Him”- the Scripture simply states that His hour had not yet come. Although He was opposed, even rejected and plotted against, Jesus was protected by God until His works and testimony were complete!

http://gabrielansley.blogspot.com/2011/03/woman-caught-in-adultery.html

1 Chronicles 6-7 May 22, 2014 John 8:21-36

Lists, lists and more lists- to us seemingly inconsequential or relegated to the narrow realm of genealogy hobbyists. These are the parts of Scripture that are almost never read carefully, consulted for guidance, or preached on. Yet these records have profound significance- they are the permanenet record of the generations of God's people. These are the memorials of God's faithful servants who lived and died before the Lord- some with great disctinction, some forgotten except for these pages.

First we have the descendants of Levi (1 Chronicles 6:1-29). Some were musicians by training, and added a deep dimension to the worship of God with music (1 Chronicles 6:31-80). The Scripture tells us: "*These are the men David put in charge of the music in the house of the LORD after the ark came to rest there. They ministered with music before the tabernacle, the tent of meeting, until Solomon built the temple of the LORD in Jerusalem. They performed their duties according to the regulations laid down for them."* (1 Chronicles 6:31-32).

The Scripture then catalogs the sons of Issachar (1 Chronicles 7:1-5) with 87,000 fighting men; the sons of Benjamin (1 Chronicles 7:6-12) with 17.200 fighting men; the sons of Naphthali (1 Chronicles 7:13)- no detail given beyond the listing of four sons; the sons of Manasseh (1 Chronicles 7:14-19); the sons of Ephriam (1 Chronicles 7:20-28)- with this interesting detail: *"Ezer and Elead were killed by the native-born men of Gath, when they went down to seize their livestock. Their father Ephraim mourned for them many days, and his relatives came to comfort him. Then he made love to his wife again, and she became pregnant and gave birth to a son. He named him Beriah, because there had been misfortune in his family. His daughter was Sheerah, who built Lower and Upper Beth Horon as well as Uzzen Sheerah."* (verses 21-14); and finally the sons of Asher (1 Chronicles 7:30-40) with 26,000 fighting men listed among them.

John 8:21-36

Two disputes are explored in the chapter of John's gospel: 1) the dispute over who Jesus is; and 2) the dispute over whose "children" Jesus' opponents are. The whole fabric of this narrative is establishment of the authority and descent of Jesus Himself- who was "from above" (John 8:23). Jesus states this case as follows: *"Once more Jesus said to them, "I am going away, and you will look for me, and you will die in your sin. Where I go, you cannot come." This made the Jews ask, "Will he kill himself? Is that why he says, 'Where I go, you cannot come'?"*
But he continued, "You are from below; I am from above. You are of this world; I am not of this world. I told you that you would die in your sins; if you do not believe that I am he, you will indeed die in your sins." "Who are you?" they asked. "Just what I have been telling you from the beginning," Jesus replied. "I have much to say in judgment of you. But he who sent me is trustworthy, and what I have heard from him I tell the world." (John 8:21-26). Jesus makes it clear that he is speaking for the Father- "what I have heard from Him I tell the world"- yet His opponenets believed that Jesus was either demon possessed or from Satan himself! It is always convenient when one's beliefs and system of morality are being challenged to simply discredit the person opposing you- and this is what they did! And no one wants to 'die in their sins".

The Jesus looked into His future- the crucifixion, in which He would be "lifted up" just as the bronze snake was lifted by Moses in the wilderness, and He explains who sent Him- the Father Himself- and many who heard these words believed. The "common folks" were not blinded by their own learning and assumptions about righteousness- they were able to hear jesus' words without the "filter" that the "experts" had: *"So Jesus said, "When you have lifted up[a] the Son of Man, then you will know that I am he and that I do nothing on my own but speak just what the Father has taught me. The one who sent me is with me; he has not left me alone, for I always do what pleases him." Even as he spoke, many believed in him."* (John 8:28-30)

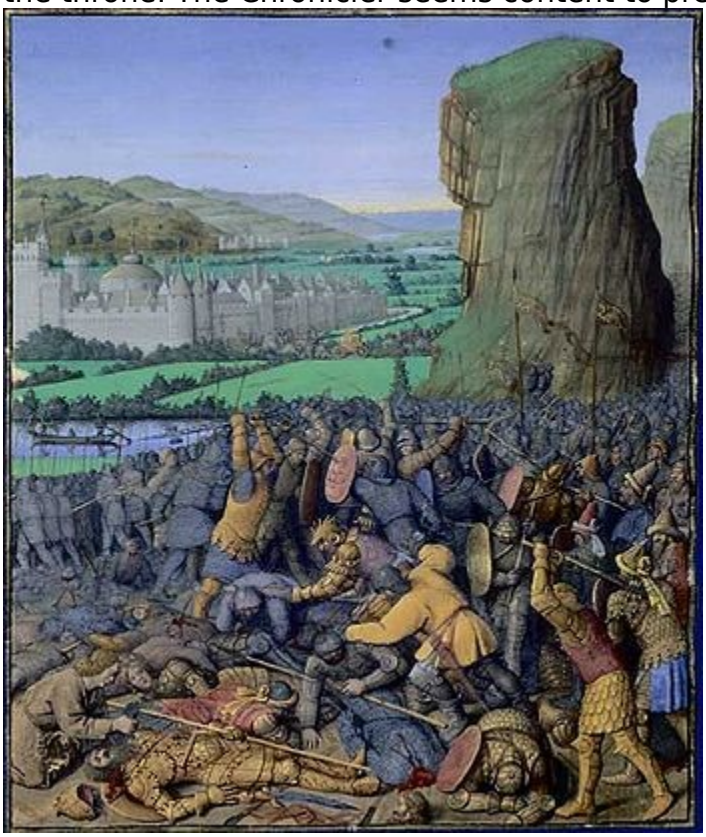
The second dispute was as contentious as the first- whose children are the "experts in the law". Thei claim was that they were Abraham's children, and they were, in a physical sense at least. But Jesus is forcing them to look at their hearts- if they truly belonged to Abraham, they would have recognized and supported Jesus instead of trying to kill Him. Jesus starts by stating a simple truth- if you follow me, you will be forgiven of your sins and will be truly free. Then the "experts", who would rather argue than hear the truth, countered with these words: *"To the Jews who had believed him, Jesus said, "If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free." They answered him, "We are Abraham's descendants and have never been slaves of anyone. How can you say that we shall be set free?"* (John 8:31-33). Jesus again tries to explain to the "experts" that they are not "free" when they are enslaved by sin, and that only a free person- not a slave- will inherit from their father: *"Jesus replied, "Very truly I tell you, everyone who sins is a slave to sin. Now a slave has no permanent place in the family, but a son belongs to it forever. So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed."* (John 8:34-36). So only with the Son is there true freedom and rightful inheritance.

1 Chronicles 8-10 May 23, 2014 John 8:37-59

The genealogy continues with the listing of ther order of descent of the tribe of Benjamin (1 Chron. 8:1-40). This tribe is very significant in Jewish history, for from the tribe of Benjamin Saul, the first earthly king of Israel, was chosen by God and anointed. I Chronicles 9 continues with a description of the settling of the Levites and others into their towns in the Promised Land (1 Chronicles 9:1-34). The narrative then focuses on the genealogy of Saul (1 Chron. 9:35-44). The line of descent was repeated from that of 1 Chronicles 8:28-33; Jeiel of Gibeon. Who with his wife Maaka, was the father of his firstborn *"Abdon, followed by Zur, Kish, Baal, Ner, Nadab, Gedor, Ahio, Zechariah and Mikloth."* (1 Chron. 9:36b-37). The line continues in 1 Chronicles 9:39: *"Ner was the father of Kish, Kish the father of Saul, and Saul the father of Jonathan, Malki-Shua, Abinadab and Esh-Baal."*

1 Chronicles 10 then shifts from genealogy to narrative, as a description of the death of Saul is given. A much more extensive record of Sauls life and rule as first king of Israel is given in the books of Samuel (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Saul). The Chronicler starts the narrative with the battle against the Philistines at Mount Gilboa, where the fighting grew fierce and Saul's sons were killed. As the Philistines gathered near Saul, he killed himself by falling on his own sword instead of allowing

himself to be captured (1 Chron. 10:1-6). The story continues, with an explanation as to why Saul had failed as a king of Israel: *“When all the Israelites in the valley saw that the army had fled and that Saul and his sons had died, they abandoned their towns and fled. And the Philistines came and occupied them. The next day, when the Philistines came to strip the dead, they found Saul and his sons fallen on Mount Gilboa. They stripped him and took his head and his armor, and sent messengers throughout the land of the Philistines to proclaim the news among their idols and their people. They put his armor in the temple of their gods and hung up his head in the temple of Dagon. When all the inhabitants of Jabesh Gilead heard what the Philistines had done to Saul, all their valiant men went and took the bodies of Saul and his sons and brought them to Jabesh. Then they buried their bones under the great tree in Jabesh, and they fasted seven days. Saul died because he was unfaithful to the Lord; he did not keep the word of the Lord and even consulted a medium for guidance, and did not inquire of the Lord. So the Lord put him to death and turned the kingdom over to David son of Jesse.”* (1 Chron. 10:7-14) There is none of the detail and richness of the narrative seen in the books of Samuel, which explored the complex relationship between Saul, who lost God’s favor, and David who gained it and was anointed by Samuel while Saul was still on the throne. The Chronicler seems content to present only the barest of details.



The Battle of Gilboa, by Jean Fouquet, the protagonists depicted anachronistically with 15th Century armour

John 8:37-59

Jesus continues to press His opponents about authority and sonship. The "experts" were not able to comprehend what Jesus was telling them, partly because their minds were truly not open to the greater truth Jesus was telling them: *"I know that you are Abraham's descendants. Yet you are looking for a way to kill me, because you have no room for my word. I am telling you what I have seen in the Father's presence, and you are doing what you have heard from your father."* (John 8:37-38). Notice that Jesus states clearly that they "have no room" for His word. They are so convinced that they alone have the truth- and all the truth- that they are unable to comprehend a deeper truth. Some of this was dur to the arrogance of education, and some just plain pride. The "experts" thought that their link to the physical line of descent from Abraham was sufficient for righteousness- what Jesus was challenging them to see was a "new reality" that comes from obedience to God and receiving His Son and His Word!

And the discussion (or argument) continues: *"Abraham is our father," they answered. "If you were Abraham's children," said Jesus, "then you would do what Abraham did. As it is, you are looking for a way to kill me, a man who has told you the truth that I heard from God. Abraham did not do such things. You are doing the works of your own father." "We are not illegitimate children," they protested. "The only Father we have is God himself." Jesus said to them, "If God were your Father, you would love me, for I have come here from God. I have not come on my own; God sent me. Why is my language not clear to you? Because you are unable to hear what I say. You belong to your father, the devil, and you want to carry out your father's desires. He was a murderer from the beginning, not holding to the truth, for there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks his native language, for he is a liar and the father of lies."* (John 8:39-44). These words must have been very hard to hear. Jesus is saying to the most "religious", most "right living", most knowledgeable about the Law that they are the very children of Satan! He makes this claim on a sound basis- they are acting like their hearts are cold and unwilling to hear a new revalation from God, they are clinging to a "fossil" religion and substituting it for true righteousness and godliness.

Then Jesus gets to the very heart of the reason they do not hear Him or receive Him as from God: *"Yet because I tell the truth, you do not believe me! Can any of you prove me guilty of sin? If I am telling the truth, why don't you believe me? Whoever belongs to God hears what God says. The reason you do not hear is that you do not belong to God."* (John 8:45-47) The experts could never have proven any sin in Jesus- he had none. His disagreement with them was seen as "sin", yet in truth it was not. They were "blind guides"- blinded to God's truth. (Matthew 15:14; 23:24) The Jesus makes an amazing claim: *"Very truly I tell you, whoever obeys my word will never see death."* (John 8:51). This to the "experts" is the last straw. They are beginning to see the depth and breadth of Jesus' claims about Himself, and they are truly astonished and outraged. The path they take in arguing with Jesus is a familiar one- discredit the person, then the message will be discredited (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ad_hominem). These are the words they used*: "At this they exclaimed, "Now we know that you are demon-possessed! Abraham died and so did the prophets, yet you say that whoever obeys your word will never taste death. Are you greater than our father Abraham? He died, and so did the prophets. Who do you think you are?"* (John 8:53-53) In just a moment, Jesus will tell them who He is- he is the "I am". Jesus turns the argument around concerning Abraham-

He states that Abraham *"rejoiced at the thought of seeing my day; he saw it and was glad."* (John 8:56b). And now they have had enough- did Jesus actually see Abraham…he was, after all, *"not yet fifty years old"* (John 8:57a). The Jesus unloads the "bombshell", using words that God the Father used with Moses so many years before: *"Very truly I tell you," Jesus answered, "before Abraham was born, I am!" At this, they picked up stones to stone him, but Jesus hid himself, slipping away from the temple grounds."* (John 8:58-59). The title/name "I am" was used only by God- and this One was claiming the same authority and identity. The Law prescribed that one who blasphemed like this must be stoned- but Jesus escaped, protected by His Father.

I Chronicles 11-13 May 24, 2014 John 9:1-23

David is then met with the elders of Israel at Hebron, where he is declared to be their leader: *"We are your own flesh and blood. In the past, even while Saul was king, you were the one who led Israel on their military campaigns. And the Lord your God said to you, 'You will shepherd my people Israel, and you will become their ruler.'"* (1 Chronicles 11:1b-2). David then conqured the walled city of Jerusalem, driving out the Jebusites. He issues a challenge- the first to lead the attack against Jerusalem would be appointed head of the army: *"Whoever leads the attack on the Jebusites will become commander-in-chief." Joab son of Zeruiah went up first, and so he received the command."* (1 Chron. 11:6b). Was this wise…? Was the one who was the boldest in battle, the one who would take risks at the possible sacrifice of safety, life and limb worthy of being the commander of the army? David certainly believd so…and Joab was to prove himself a wise choice thereafter. David consolidated his power once Jerusalem was his, and the Chronicler gives credit to God: *"And David became more and more powerful, because the Lord Almighty was with him."* (1 Chron. 11:9). We are not to take credit for what God has done, we are simply to give Him the praise, honor and glory that is His due.

The last part of 1 Chronicles 11 is a listing of David's "mighty warriors" and the exploits of each (1 Chronicles 11:10-47). Other "warriors" were soon to join David in his ongoing battle with Saul for the hearts and minds of the people of Israel (1 Chron. 12:1-20). And the assembled army was described in glowing terms*: "Day after day men came to help David, until he had a great army, like the army of God."* (1 Chronicles 12:22). And even more men volunteered to help David in his fight to gain control of Israel. It was as if a mighty wind blew through the land, gathering force as it went: *"All these were fighting men who volunteered to serve in the ranks. They came to Hebron fully determined to make David king over all Israel. All the rest of the Israelites were also of one mind to make David king. The men spent three days there with David, eating and drinking, for their families had supplied provisions for them. Also, their neighbors from as far away as Issachar, Zebulun and Naphtali came bringing food on donkeys, camels, mules and oxen. There were plentiful supplies of flour, fig cakes, raisin cakes, wine, olive oil, cattle and sheep, for there was joy in Israel."* (1 Chronicles 12:38-40). The abundance was obvious, and the joy was contagious.

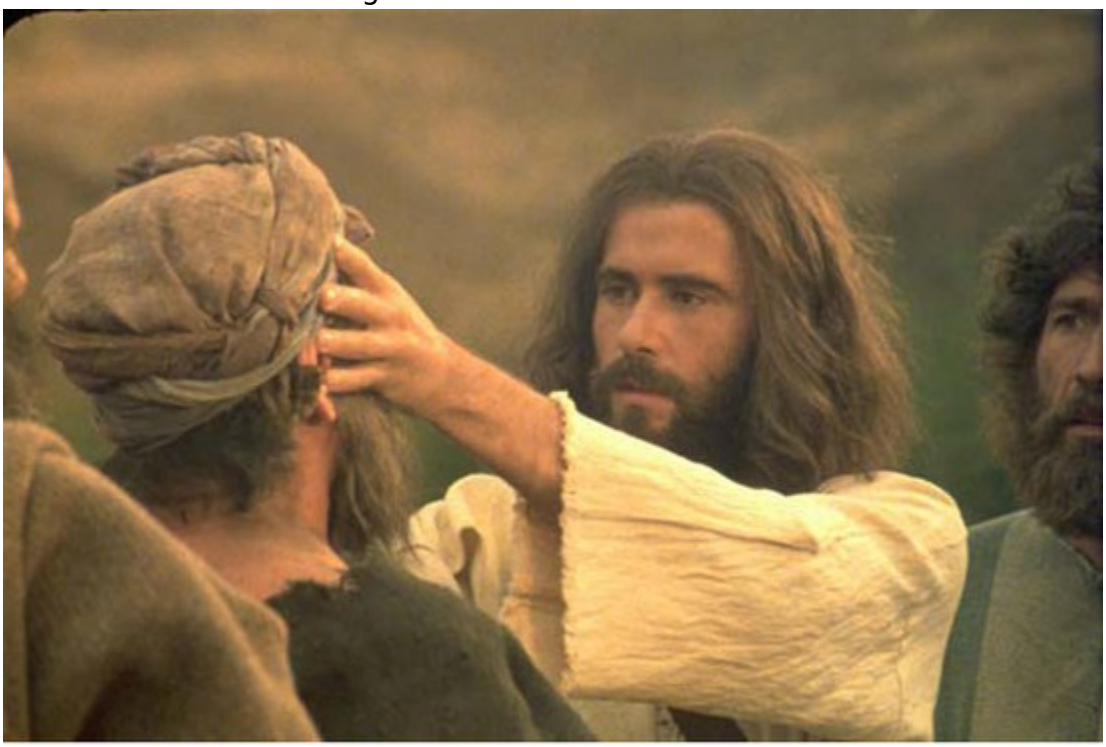
Then the Ark was returned to its rightful place in Jerusalem. David said to the asempled people: *"If it seems good to you and if it is the will of the Lord our God, let us send word far and wide to the rest of our people throughout the territories of*

Israel, and also to the priests and Levites who are with them in their towns and pasturelands, to come and join us. Let us bring the ark of our God back to us, for we did not inquire of[g] it[h] during the reign of Saul." The whole assembly agreed to do this, because it seemed right to all the people." (1 Chronicles 13:2b-4) The Ark, the center of rightful worship, had been displaced geographically, and had not been consulted during all of Saul's reign. This statement reflects symbolically the departure of Saul from the counsel of God, and was the primary cause of his eventual replacement as king of God's people! The Ark was brought from Baalah of Judah (Kiriath Jearim) with rejoicing and celebration: *"They moved the ark of God from Abinadab's house on a new cart, with Uzzah and Ahio guiding it. David and all the Israelites were celebrating with all their might before God, with songs and with harps, lyres, timbrels, cymbals and trumpets."* (1 Chrom. 13:7-8). The joy was short lived; when Uzziah tried to prevent the Ark from falling off its cart and touched it, God struck him down: *"The Lord's anger burned against Uzzah, and he struck him down because he had put his hand on the ark. So he died there before God."* (1 Chron. 13:10). David reacted to this event with both anger and fear: *"Then David was angry because the LORD's wrath had broken out against Uzzah, and to this day that place is called Perez Uzzah. David was afraid of God that day and asked, "How can I ever bring the ark of God to me?" He did not take the ark to be with him in the City of David. Instead, he took it to the house of Obed-Edom the Gittite. The ark of God remained with the family of Obed-Edom in his house for three months, and the LORD blessed his household and everything he had."* (1 Chron. 13:11-14). Notice that God found a way to create a blessing out of this frightening and tragic occurrence! He blessed the household of Obed-Edom, showing His love and mercy.

John 9:1-23

The key verses to me in this passage comes a lttle after the end of this section of John 9 we are examining today- it is verses 32 and 33, which state the following*: "Nobody has ever heard of opening the eyes of a man born blind. If this man were not from God, he could do nothing."* (John 9:32-33). This story of healing has many dimensions- about the senses themselves, about how we perceive God- correctly and incorrectly, and also about how serios Jesus' enemies were about discrediting Him. In John 9:22, when the blind man's parents are asked about "who did this healing" and were afraid to show any allegiance of belief in Jesus. His parents said that they "didn't know who had performed this amazing healing, and that those asking should ask their son who had just been healed: *"His parents said this because they were afraid of the Jewish leaders, who already had decided that anyone who acknowledged that Jesus was the Messiah would be put out of the synagogue."* (John 9:22). Only God Himself had the power to restore the sight of one born blind, and if Jesus were to be recognized as the healer, then this would be a clear sign of His partnership with God, and His special relationship with God. The Pharisees did everything they could think of to refute this Man and His claims- even to the point of "putting people out" of the synagogue. This amounts to a modern Christian "excommunication"! As far as the Pharisees were concerned, there was no possible way that this One could be from God: "This man is not from God, for he does not keep the Sabbath." (John 9:16). They strongly believed that the minimum requirement for righteousness was strict adherence to the Law, and their primary strategy was to discover times and places where Jesus broke the Sabbath, or broke their "laws". And yet there it was- a "muddy miracle" of restored sight. The one

who was healed simply testified*: "The man they call Jesus made some mud and put it on my eyes. He told me to go to Siloam and wash. So I went and washed, and then I could see."* (John 9:11). His testimony was powerful and undeniable, and the Pharisees lost still more ground to those who had witnessed this incredible healing!



JESUSCARITASEST.ORG: Seeing

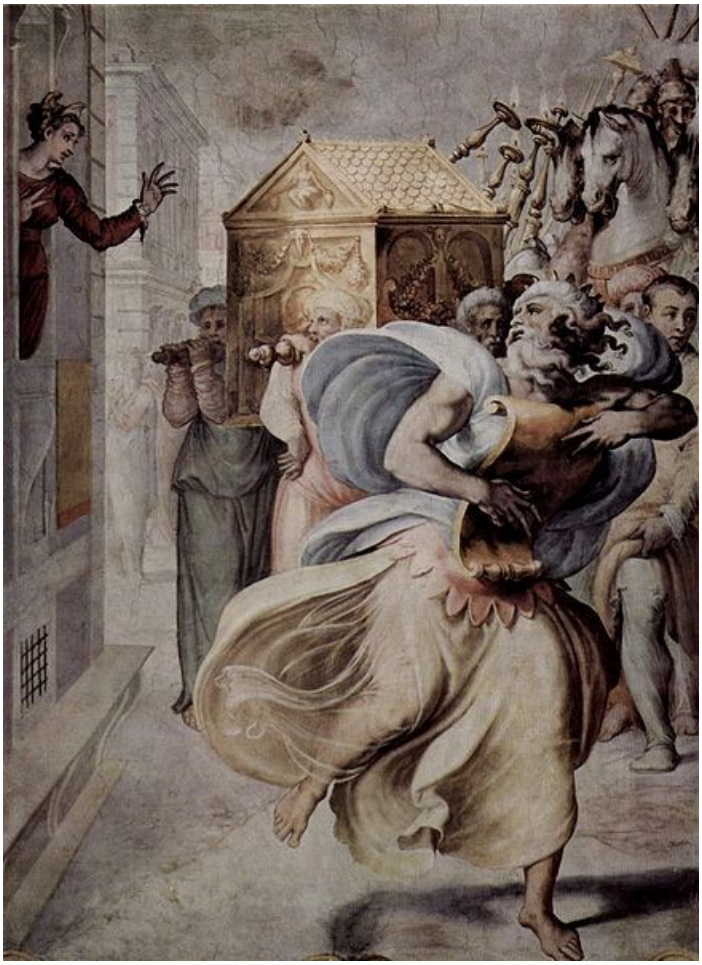
1 Chronicles 14-16 May 25, 2014 John 9:24-41

Hiram of Tyre could see clearly what blessings God had bestowed on David, so he sent building materials to David so that he could build a temple in Jerusalem. This was an extraordinary gift, since cedar and other building worthy trees are relatively rare in Israel. http://www.biblicalarchaeology.org/daily/biblical-artifacts/artifacts-and-the-bible/lebanese-cedar%E2%80%94the-prized-tree-of-ancient-woodworking/
The Philistines quickly challenged and tested David, but David, with God's protection and blessing, was able to subdue them: *"When the Philistines heard that David had been anointed king over all Israel, they went up in full force to search for him, but David heard about it and went out to meet them. Now the Philistines had come and raided the Valley of Rephaim; so David inquired of God: "Shall I go and attack the Philistines? Will you deliver them into my hands?" The Lord answered him, "Go, I will deliver them into your hands." So David and his men went up to Baal Perazim, and there he defeated them. He said, "As waters break out, God has broken out against my enemies by my hand." So that place was called Baal Perazim. The Philistines had abandoned their gods there, and David gave orders to burn them in the fire."* (1 Chron. 14:8-12). And then it was time to bring the Ark back to Jerusalem. David was understandably concerned about the manner in which the Ark was transported- Uzziah had been struck down by God for simply touching it to prevent it falling. Only the priests would be allowed to handle and move the Ark, and they were to do it with proper care: *"No one but the Levites may*

carry the ark of God, because the LORD chose them to carry the ark of the LORD and to minister before him forever." (1 Chron. 15:2b) David gave very careful instructions to the priests for handling the Ark with care and reverence: *"Then David summoned Zadok and Abiathar the priests, and Uriel, Asaiah, Joel, Shemaiah, Eliel and Amminadab the Levites. He said to them, "You are the heads of the Levitical families; you and your fellow Levites are to consecrate yourselves and bring up the ark of the Lord, the God of Israel, to the place I have prepared for it. It was because you, the Levites, did not bring it up the first time that the Lord our God broke out in anger against us. We did not inquire of him about how to do it in the prescribed way." So the priests and Levites consecrated themselves in order to bring up the ark of the Lord, the God of Israel. And the Levites carried the ark of God with the poles on their shoulders, as Moses had commanded in accordance with the word of the Lord."* (1 Chron. 15:11-15)

Singers and musicians were appointed, and the Ark was brought to Jerusalem with singing, instrumental music and dancing: *"So David and the elders of Israel and the commanders of units of a thousand went to bring up the ark of the covenant of the LORD from the house of Obed-Edom, with rejoicing. Because God had helped the Levites who were carrying the ark of the covenant of theLORD, seven bulls and seven rams were sacrificed. Now David was clothed in a robe of fine linen, as were all the Levites who were carrying the ark, and as were the musicians, and Kenaniah, who was in charge of the singing of the choirs. David also wore a linen ephod. So all Israel brought up the ark of the covenant of the LORD with shouts, with the sounding of rams' horns and trumpets, and of cymbals, and the playing of lyres and harps."* (1 Chron. 15:25-28). Our own worship is so casual that we sometimes forget the awesome majesty, power and righteousness of God our Father and Creator! Perhaps we should take a cue from this joyous celebration of "God in our midst"!

Michal, Saul's daughter, did not share in the rejoicing. She saw David dancing and felt shame and embarrassment. The open and joyous display of emotion by David was viewed by Michal as somehow not appropriate for a king, and probably she felt it diminished her stature as well. God was not pleased with this negative attitude:" As the ark of the covenant of the Lord was entering the City of David, Michal daughter of Saul watched from a window. And when she saw King David dancing and celebrating, she despised him in her heart." (1 Chron. 15:29) She died childless (2 Samuel 6:23).



Francesco Salviati (c. 1553) Michal watches David dance before the ark

The Ark was then brought to a tent, its quarters until Solomon would build his magnificent Temple. David appointed Levites to conduct regular sacrifices and other acts of praise and worship: *"They brought the ark of God and set it inside the tent that David had pitched for it, and they presented burnt offerings and fellowship offerings before God. After David had finished sacrificing the burnt offerings and fellowship offerings, he blessed the people in the name of the Lord. Then he gave a loaf of bread, a cake of dates and a cake of raisins to each Israelite man and woman. He appointed some of the Levites to minister before the ark of the Lord, to extol, thank, and praise the Lord, the God of Israel: Asaph was the chief, and next to him in rank were Zechariah, then Jaaziel, Shemiramoth, Jehiel, Mattithiah, Eliab, Benaiah, Obed-Edom and Jeiel. They were to play the lyres and harps, Asaph was to sound the cymbals, and Benaiah and Jahaziel the priests were to blow the trumpets regularly before the ark of the covenant of God."* (1 Chron. 16:1-6). Then a long poem of praise follows, reminiscent of the Psalms of praise we see later in the Hebrew scriptures (1 Chron. 16:7-36). Having conquered many of his enemies, and having brought the Ark back to its rightful place, David departed *"to bless his family"* (1 Chron. 16:43). This is what God has called me to do as well, and with His help, I will!

John 9:24-41

The “experts in the law” were faced with an “inconvenient rtuth” (apologies to Al Gore)- the man before them had been healed, Jesus had clearly done the healing, and yet their purpose was to deny and discredit. This “unschooled rabbi” was out of their control, and was raising issues and gaining followers in a way that was threatening to them. They pretended to want the truth, but what they really wanted was affirmation of “the truth”. So they asked the man who was healed the sae questions again, perhaps hoping for a different answer: *“A second time they summoned the man who had been blind. “Give glory to God by telling the truth,” they said. “We know this man is a sinner.” He replied, “Whether he is a sinner or not, I don’t know. One thing I do know. I was blind but now I see!” Then they asked him, “What did he do to you? How did he open your eyes?” He answered, “I have told you already and you did not listen. Why do you want to hear it again? Do you want to become his disciples too?” Then they hurled insults at him and said, “You are this fellow’s disciple! We are disciples of Moses! We know that God spoke to Moses, but as for this fellow, we don’t even know where he comes from.” The man answered, “Now that is remarkable! You don’t know where he comes from, yet he opened my eyes. We know that God does not listen to sinners. He listens to the godly person who does his will. Nobody has ever heard of opening the eyes of a man born blind. If this man were not from God, he could do nothing.” To this they replied, “You were steeped in sin at birth; how dare you lecture us!” And they threw him out.”* (John 9:24-34). When the healed man pointed out that jesus must have been “from God” to do this miracle, the “experts” denied his testimony by declaring that this (now healed) man was “steeped in sin at birth”. They defeneded their indefensible situation by denying and attacking the character of the witness…and “old trick” that is overcome eventually by the truth itself.

Jesus then explores the meaning of blindness- both physical and spiritual. He has healed the man of his physical blindness, and because his attitude was one of gratefulness and joy, he was truly able to “see” spiritually and accpt Jesus as the “Son of Man”. The Pharisees, who were truly “blind” spiritually, were not able to see and therefore could not accept God’s gift- which was literally standing before them- so their sin remained- unforgiven: *“Jesus heard that they had thrown him out, and when he found him, he said, “Do you believe in the Son of Man?” “Who is he, sir?” the man asked. “Tell me so that I may believe in him.” Jesus said, “You have now seen him; in fact, he is the one speaking with you.” Then the man said, “Lord, I believe,” and he worshiped him. Jesus said, “For judgment I have come into this world, so that the blind will see and those who see will become blind.” Some Pharisees who were with him heard him say this and asked, “What? Are we blind too?” Jesus said, “If you were blind, you would not be guilty of sin; but now that you claim you can see, your guilt remains.”* (John 9:35-41)

1 Chromicles 17-19 May 26, 2014 John 10:1-21

To build the Temple…or not? David’s desire was to give the Ark, and God’s symbolic and real presence- a permanent home: *“Here I am, living in a house of cedar, while*

the ark of the covenant of the Lord is under a tent." (1 Chron. 17:1b). So Nathan the prophet inquired of the Lord, and God revealed that He would bless David, but that one of his sons would be the builder of the Temple. God stated to Nathan: *"Go and tell my servant David, 'This is what the Lord says: You are not the one to build me a house to dwell in. I have not dwelt in a house from the day I brought Israel up out of Egypt to this day. I have moved from one tent site to another, from one dwelling place to another. Wherever I have moved with all the Israelites, did I ever say to any of their leaders whom I commanded to shepherd my people, "Why have you not built me a house of cedar?"'* (1 Chron. 17:4-6).

Instead of showing disappointment and bitterness, David accepted God's revelation with humility and grace. He shows his true heart by graciously accepting God's will for him: *"Who am I, Lord God, and what is my family, that you have brought me this far? And as if this were not enough in your sight, my God, you have spoken about the future of the house of your servant. You, Lord God, have looked on me as though I were the most exalted of men. "What more can David say to you for honoring your servant? For you know your servant, Lord. For the sake of your servant and according to your will, you have done this great thing and made known all these great promises. "There is no one like you, Lord, and there is no God but you, as we have heard with our own ears. And who is like your people Israel—the one nation on earth whose God went out to redeem a people for himself, and to make a name for yourself, and to perform great and awesome wonders by driving out nations from before your people, whom you redeemed from Egypt? You made your people Israel your very own forever, and you, Lord, have become their God. "And now, Lord, let the promise you have made concerning your servant and his house be established forever. Do as you promised, so that it will be established and that your name will be great forever. Then people will say, 'The Lord Almighty, the God over Israel, is Israel's God!' And the house of your servant David will be established before you."* (1 Chron. 17:16b-24)

1 Chronicles 18 is a catalog of David's victories: 1) over the Philistines (1 Chron. 18:1); 2) over the Moabites (1 Chron 18:2); 3) over Hadadezar king of Zobah (1 Chron. 18:3-4); 4) over the Arameans who came to help Hadadezar (1 Chron. 18:5-6). And David showed his true devotion to God by dedicating the silver and gold he captured in battle to the Lord (1 Chron. 18:7-11). Abishai also struck down and conquered the Edomites (1 Chron. 18:12-13). In summary: "The Lord gave David victory wherever he went." (1 Chron. 18:13b) This was neither an accident nor "luck"- God was at the center of David's successes. The kingdom was, for a time at least, united, and David ruled over it with God's blessings: *"David reigned over all Israel, doing what was just and right for all his people. Joab son of Zeruiah was over the army; Jehoshaphat son of Ahilud was recorder; Zadok son of Ahitub and Ahimelek[c] son of Abiathar were priests; Shavsha was secretary; Benaiah son of Jehoiada was over the Kerethites and Pelethites; and David's sons were chief officials at the king's side."* (1 Chron. 18:14-17).

David decided to show sympathy and support to the Ammonites when their king Nahash died. So David sent an envoy to Nahash's son Hanun. But instead of being received with gratitude, Hanun humiliated the envoy: *"When David's envoys came to Hanun in the land of the Ammonites to express sympathy to him, the Ammonite commanders said to Hanun, "Do you think David is honoring your father by sending*

envoys to you to express sympathy? Haven't his envoys come to you only to explore and spy out the country and overthrow it?" So Hanun seized David's envoys, shaved them, cut off their garments at the buttocks, and sent them away. When someone came and told David about the men, he sent messengers to meet them, for they were greatly humiliated. The king said, "Stay at Jericho till your beards have grown, and then come back." (1 Chron. 19:2b-5). This insult had to be answered, so David summoned his entire fighting force to meet the Ammonites in battle: *On hearing this, David sent Joab out with the entire army of fighting men. The Ammonites came out and drew up in battle formation at the entrance to their city, while the kings who had come were by themselves in the open country. Joab saw that there were battle lines in front of him and behind him; so he selected some of the best troops in Israel and deployed them against the Arameans. He put the rest of the men under the command of Abishai his brother, and they were deployed against the Ammonites. Joab said, "If the Arameans are too strong for me, then you are to rescue me; but if the Ammonites are too strong for you, then I will rescue you. Be strong, and let us fight bravely for our people and the cities of our God. The Lord will do what is good in his sight." Then Joab and the troops with him advanced to fight the Arameans, and they fled before him. When the Ammonites realized that the Arameans were fleeing, they too fled before his brother Abishai and went inside the city. So Joab went back to Jerusalem. After the Arameans saw that they had been routed by Israel, they sent messengers and had Arameans brought from beyond the Euphrates River, with Shophak the commander of Hadadezer's army leading them.*

When David was told of this, he gathered all Israel and crossed the Jordan; he advanced against them and formed his battle lines opposite them. David formed his lines to meet the Arameans in battle, and they fought against him. But they fled before Israel, and David killed seven thousand of their charioteers and forty thousand of their foot soldiers. He also killed Shophak the commander of their army. When the vassals of Hadadezer saw that they had been routed by Israel, they made peace with David and became subject to him." (1 Chron. 19:8-19). It shouls be emphasized that the army of David was victories not primarily because of strategy or fighting skill, but because they were fighting "for our people and the cities of our God". And God gave David great victory in this battle!

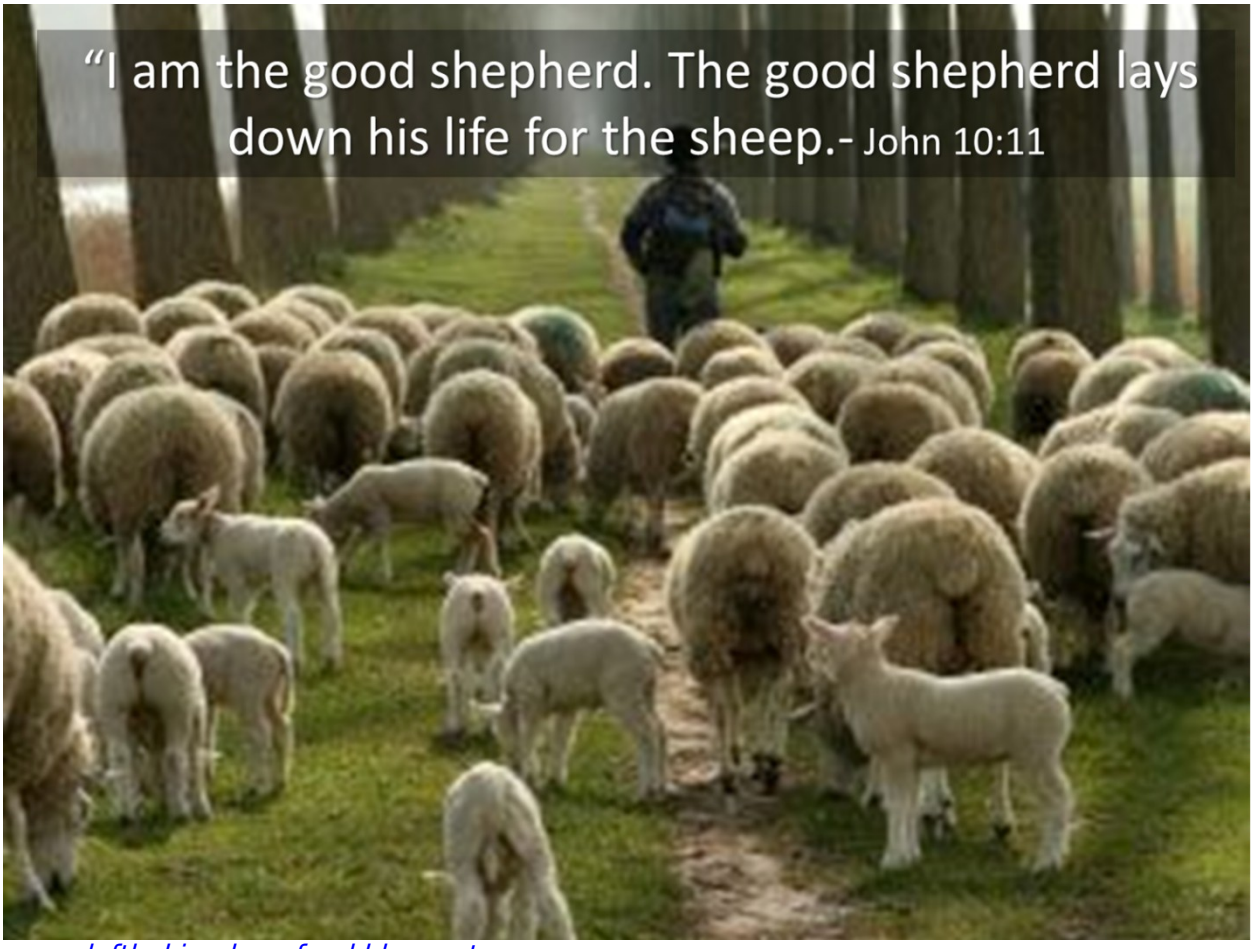
John 10:1-21

Jesus said "I am the Good Shepherd" (John 10:14). This is one of a series of statements recorded in John's gospel as the "I am" passages- the fourth of seven such statements (http://www.gotquestions.org/Good-Shepherd.html). What did this mean to Jesus and His followers? Jesus says elsewhere in the gospel accounts that His people- whom He was called to save (Matthew 9:36; Mark 6:34; Isaiah 13:14) He saw that the people, like sheep, were able to sense when the one leading them loved them- and would lay down their lives for them. He also saw the people like sheep in that they wandered from one leader to another, from one prophet or king to another, without any real idea as to where they were to go. They were not so much evil as clueless. And this caused Jesus to weep over them (Luke 19:41-44).

So Jesus explains to His followers: *"I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me— just as the Father knows me and I know the Father—and I lay*

down my life for the sheep. I have other sheep that are not of this sheep pen. I must bring them also. They too will listen to my voice, and there shall be one flock and one shepherd. The reason my Father loves me is that I lay down my life—only to take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down and authority to take it up again. This command I received from my Father." (John 10:14-18).

Not surprisingly, the reaction to this was divided. It was dicvided among those who were seeking the truth and desired to know God and His will, and those who rejected Jesus and His testimonies, sugns, teaching and claims. Just as now, they were deeply divided over this "rabbi"- were they to reject Him as a lunaric or liar (as C.C. Lewis' famous quote alludes) or follow Him as Lord? *"The Jews who heard these words were again divided. Many of them said, "He is demon-possessed and raving mad. Why listen to him?" But others said, "These are not the sayings of a man possessed by a demon. Can a demon open the eyes of the blind?"* (John 10:19-21)



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1 Chronicles 20-22 May 27, 2014 John 10:22-42

David soon had success in battle over the Ammonites. He had Joab lay siege to Rabbah, the capital city, and took the crown of the king as plunder (1 Chron. 20:1-3). He took "much plunder" and consigned the conquered people to forced labot. David was also able to achieve reat success in battle over the Philistines- the constant thorn in the side of Israel. Some of David's "mighty men" showed their prowess in battle during this time (1 Chron. 20:4-8).

Then David committed what was perhaps the second worse thing he ever did- second only to adultery (and subsequent murder) with Bathsheba- he took an inventory of his fighting men. This may seem to be trivial tio us- after all, isn't it incumbent on a general or king to know the strength and morale of their army? But this act showed Davi'd's lack of trust and dependence on God alone, and was offensive to God (1 Chron 21:1-17) *"Satan rose up against Israel and incited David to take a census of Israel. 2 So David said to Joab and the commanders of the troops, "Go and count the Israelites from Beersheba to Dan. Then report back to me so that I may know how many there are." 3 But Joab replied, "May the Lord multiply his troops a hundred times over. My lord the king, are they not all my lord's subjects? Why does my lord want to do this? Why should he bring guilt on Israel?" 4*

The king's word, however, overruled Joab; so Joab left and went throughout Israel and then came back to Jerusalem. 5 Joab reported the number of the fighting men to David: In all Israel there were one million one hundred thousand men who could handle a sword, including four hundred and seventy thousand in Judah. 6 But Joab did not include Levi and Benjamin in the numbering, because the king's command was repulsive to him. 7 This command was also evil in the sight of God; so he punished Israel. 8 Then David said to God, "I have sinned greatly by doing this. Now, I beg you, take away the guilt of your servant. I have done a very foolish thing." 9 The Lord said to Gad, David's seer, 10 "Go and tell David, 'This is what the Lord says: I am giving you three options. Choose one of them for me to carry out against you.'" 11 So Gad went to David and said to him, "This is what the Lord says: 'Take your choice: 12 three years of famine, three months of being swept away[c] before your enemies, with their swords overtaking you, or three days of the sword of the Lord—days of plague in the land, with the angel of the Lord ravaging every part of Israel.' Now then, decide how I should answer the one who sent me." 13 David said to Gad, "I am in deep distress. Let me fall into the hands of the Lord, for his mercy is very great; but do not let me fall into human hands." 14 So the Lord sent a plague on Israel, and seventy thousand men of Israel fell dead. 15 And God sent an angel to destroy Jerusalem. But as the angel was doing so, the Lord saw it and relented concerning the disaster and said to the angel who was destroying the people, "Enough! Withdraw your hand." The angel of the Lord was then standing at the threshing floor of Araunah[d] the Jebusite. 16 David looked up and saw the angel of the Lord standing between heaven and earth, with a drawn sword in his hand extended over Jerusalem. Then David and the elders, clothed in sackcloth, fell facedown. 17 David said to God, "Was it not I who ordered the fighting men to be counted? I, the shepherd,[e] have sinned and done wrong. These are but sheep. What have they done? Lord my God, let your hand fall on me and my family, but do not let this plague remain on your people." The Chronicler gives credit for the idea of a census to Satan, but it is clear that David desired it. Joab objected- perhaps his moral compass was better than that of David at this point, but David insisted on a count. Joab, being a good soldier, obeyed the orders. We will see more of the threshing floor of Araunah the Jebusite later- it by legend is the spot where Solomon was later to build the Temple (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Araunah). Although Araunah offered the threshing floor to David at no cost, David insisted on paying for it: *"But King David replied to Araunah, "No, I insist on paying the full price. I will not take for the Lord what is yours, or sacrifice a burnt offering that costs me nothing."* (1 Chron. 21:24). This is the principle of giving to God- if it is a "gift" that costs the giver nothing, then it is hardly a gift, much less a sacrifice!

David was careful to inform and prepare Solomon for the task of building the Temple, although it must have grieved David that God did not choose him for this task but instead chose David's son: Then David said, *"The house of the Lord God is to be here, and also the altar of burnt offering for Israel." 2 So David gave orders to assemble the foreigners residing in Israel, and from among them he appointed stonecutters to prepare dressed stone for building the house of God. 3 He provided a large amount of iron to make nails for the doors of the gateways and for the fittings, and more bronze than could be weighed. 4 He also provided more cedar logs than could be counted, for the Sidonians and Tyrians had brought large numbers of them to David. David said, "My son Solomon is young and inexperienced, and the house to be built for the Lord should be of great*

magnificence and fame and splendor in the sight of all the nations. Therefore I will make preparations for it." So David made extensive preparations before his death.

6 Then he called for his son Solomon and charged him to build a house for the Lord, the God of Israel. 7 David said to Solomon: "My son, I had it in my heart to build a house for the Name of the Lord my God. 8 But this word of the Lord came to me: 'You have shed much blood and have fought many wars. You are not to build a house for my Name, because you have shed much blood on the earth in my sight. 9 But you will have a son who will be a man of peace and rest, and I will give him rest from all his enemies on every side. His name will be Solomon,[g] and I will grant Israel peace and quiet during his reign. 10 He is the one who will build a house for my Name. He will be my son, and I will be his father. And I will establish the throne of his kingdom over Israel forever.' (1 Chron. 22:1-10)

David made extensive and detailed preparations for this monumental task, insuring that Solomon would have both the plans and the means to accomplish this project- dedicated "to the Lord" from the beginning: *"I have taken great pains to provide for the temple of the Lord a hundred thousand talents of gold, a million talents of silver, quantities of bronze and iron too great to be weighed, and wood and stone. And you may add to them. You have many workers: stonecutters, masons and carpenters, as well as those skilled in every kind of work in gold and silver, bronze and iron— craftsmen beyond number. Now begin the work, and the Lord be with you." Then David ordered all the leaders of Israel to help his son Solomon. He said to them, "Is not the Lord your God with you? And has he not granted you rest on every side? For he has given the inhabitants of the land into my hands, and the land is subject to the Lord and to his people. Now devote your heart and soul to seeking the Lord your God. Begin to build the sanctuary of the Lord God, so that you may bring the ark of the covenant of the Lord and the sacred articles belonging to God into the temple that will be built for the Name of the Lord."* (1 Chron. 22:14-19)

John 10:22-42

Once again Jesus is confronted physically- with intent to kill or do great harm- for His "claims" about Himself. He was asked the question that many were seeking a clear answer to: *"How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Messiah, tell us plainly."* (John 10:24). Simply "saying" that He was the Messiah would have two bad aspects: 1) His enemies could then accuse Him of blasphemy- which they did!; 2) the works Jesus did were His credentials- if the hearer could see that God was clearly blessing, empowering and validating His Son, then the words themselves would not add any credibility to Jesus' claims. He in so many words argued this way when He said to them: *"I did tell you, but you do not believe. The works I do in my Father's name testify about me, but you do not believe because you are not my sheep. My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one will snatch them out of my hand. My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all; no one can snatch them out of my Father's hand. I and the Father are one."* (John 10:25b-30). So Jesus satisfies their "need" to hear the words of affirmation, but by making His calims clear, He arouses the "good religious people" to outrage and murderous anger- who indeed was this Jesus to claim equality with God? *"Again his Jewish opponents*

picked up stones to stone him, but Jesus said to them, "I have shown you many good works from the Father. For which of these do you stone me?" "We are not stoning you for any good work," they replied, "but for blasphemy, because you, a mere man, claim to be God." (John 10:31-33). Then Jesus shows His absolute mastery of Scripture and quotes from Psalm 82:6. Jesus answered them, *"Is it not written in your Law, 'I have said you are "gods"'[d]? 35 If he called them 'gods,' to whom the word of God came—and Scripture cannot be set aside— 36 what about the one whom the Father set apart as his very own and sent into the world? Why then do you accuse me of blasphemy because I said, 'I am God's Son'? 37 Do not believe me unless I do the works of my Father. 38 But if I do them, even though you do not believe me, believe the works, that you may know and understand that the Father is in me, and I in the Father."* (John 10:34-38) And so Jesus again points to the "works" that He is doing- and the "seven signs" that John is presenting in his gospel- for validation of His claims!

Then two things happen: 1) Jesus again escapes the grasp of the people- and escapes death by stoning; 2) the "works" that Jesus is pointing to are believed- by "many" who had perhaps heard John's testimony about Jesus: *"Again they tried to seize him, but he escaped their grasp.*
40 Then Jesus went back across the Jordan to the place where John had been baptizing in the early days. There he stayed, and many people came to him. They said, "Though John never performed a sign, all that John said about this man was true." And in that place many believed in Jesus." (John 10:39-42)

1 Chronicles 23-25 May 28, 2014 John 11:1-17

So the years were catching up to David, and he knew the time would come soon for his son Solomon to succeed him. Before David's reign was completed, he divided the tribe of Levi- the priests, into three groups named after the head of each Levite clan: *"When David was old and full of years, he made his son Solomon king over Israel. He also gathered together all the leaders of Israel, as well as the priests and Levites. The Levites thirty years old or more were counted, and the total number of men was thirty-eight thousand. David said, "Of these, twenty-four thousand are to be in charge of the work of the temple of the LORD and six thousand are to be officials and judges. Four thousand are to be gatekeepers and four thousand are to praise the LORD with the musical instruments I have provided for that purpose." David separated the Levites into divisions corresponding to the sons of Levi: Gershon, Kohath and Merari."* (1 Chron. 23:1-6).

The Chronicler then lists the heads of the families and descendants of Gershon (1 Chron. 23:7-11); the descendants of Kohath (1 Chron. 23:12-20) and the descendants of Merari (1 Chron 23:21-23). The duties and responsibilities of the Levites were then given in detail: *"The duty of the Levites was to help Aaron's descendants in the service of the temple of the Lord: to be in charge of the courtyards, the side rooms, the purification of all sacred things and the performance of other duties at the house of God. They were in charge of the bread set out on the table, the special flour for the grain offerings, the thin loaves made without yeast, the baking and the mixing, and all measurements of quantity and size. They*

were also to stand every morning to thank and praise the Lord. They were to do the same in the evening and whenever burnt offerings were presented to the Lord on the Sabbaths, at the New Moon feasts and at the appointed festivals. They were to serve before the Lord regularly in the proper number and in the way prescribed for them. And so the Levites carried out their responsibilities for the tent of meeting, for the Holy Place and, under their relatives the descendants of Aaron, for the service of the temple of the Lord." (1 Chron. 23:28-32).

The priesthood was to consist of the descendants of Aaron. Aaron's sons are named in the next section of 1 Chronicles: *"The sons of Aaron were Nadab, Abihu, Eleazar and Ithamar. But Nadab and Abihu died before their father did, and they had no sons; so Eleazar and Ithamar served as the priests. With the help of Zadok a descendant of Eleazar and Ahimelek a descendant of Ithamar, David separated them into divisions for their appointed order of ministering. A larger number of leaders were found among Eleazar's descendants than among Ithamar's, and they were divided accordingly: sixteen heads of families from Eleazar's descendants and eight heads of families from Ithamar's descendants. They divided them impartially by casting lots, for there were officials of the sanctuary and officials of God among the descendants of both Eleazar and Ithamar."* (1 Chron. 24:1b-5). The Levites cast lots to determine the order of their service: *"These were the Levites, according to their families. They also cast lots, just as their relatives the descendants of Aaron did, in the presence of King David and of Zadok, Ahimelek, and the heads of families of the priests and of the Levites. The families of the oldest brother were treated the same as those of the youngest."* (1 Chron. 24:30b-31).

The sons of Asaph were to provide the music for worship: "*David, together with the commanders of the army, set apart some of the sons of Asaph, Hemanand Jeduthun for the ministry of prophesying, accompanied by harps, lyres and cymbals. Here is the list of the men who performed this service: From the sons of Asaph: Zakkur, Joseph, Nethaniah and Asarelah. The sons of Asaph were under the supervision of Asaph, who prophesied under the king's supervision. As for Jeduthun, from his sons: Gedaliah, Zeri, Jeshaiah, Shimei, Hashabiah and Mattithiah, six in all, under the supervision of their father Jeduthun, who prophesied, using the harp in thanking and praising the LORD. As for Heman, from his sons: Bukkiah, Mattaniah, Uzziel, Shubael and Jerimoth; Hananiah, Hanani, Eliathah, Giddalti and Romamti-Ezer; Joshbekashah, Mallothi, Hothir and Mahazioth. (All these were sons of Heman the king's seer. They were given him through the promises of God to exalt him. God gave Heman fourteen sons and three daughters.) All these men were under the supervision of their father for the music of the temple of the LORD, with cymbals, lyres and harps, for the ministry at the house of God."* (1 Chron 25:1-6) Asaph is identified as the author of a number of the Psalms (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Psalms_of_Asaph).

John 11:1-17

Jesus made friends during His ministry- among them was Lazarus, the brother of Mary. Lazarus became ill, and Mary and her sister Martha summoned Jesus. Surely he could heal Lazarus. But Jesus stayed gone two more days: *"Now a man named Lazarus was sick. He was from Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. (This Mary, whose brother Lazarus now lay sick, was the same one who poured*

perfume on the Lord and wiped his feet with her hair.) So the sisters sent word to Jesus, "Lord, the one you love is sick." When he heard this, Jesus said, "This sickness will not end in death. No, it is for God's glory so that God's Son may be glorified through it." Now Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus. So when he heard that Lazarus was sick, he stayed where he was two more days, and then he said to his disciples, "Let us go back to Judea." (John 11:1-6). Several things are remarkable about this story: 1) Jesus waited two days, even though He knew Lazarus was critically ill; 2) Jesus chose to return to Judea, where He had narrowly escaped stoning. Now Jesus plainly says "this sickness will not end in death", but Lazarus does indeed die. Did Jesus mean that He would bring him back from death, or was He simply mistaken about the seriousness of the illness?

Then Lazarus dies, and Jesus knows that he is dead, and He says to His followers: *"After he had said this, he went on to tell them, "Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep; but I am going there to wake him up." His disciples replied, "Lord, if he sleeps, he will get better." Jesus had been speaking of his death, but his disciples thought he meant natural sleep. So then he told them plainly, "Lazarus is dead, and for your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him."* (John 11:11-14). Now Jesus sees this opportunity to again demonstrate His power over sin and death. Detah was, and is, the natural enemy of us all. It can rob us of hope, and it threatens the deep notion inside of us that we were not meant to die but to live forever. In the perfecr Eden God created, we were meant to live forvere in perfect relationship with our Creator- but sin forever marred the picture. And God senf His Son to conquer both sin and death- just as He was about to demonstrate. When Jesus arrived, He discovered that Lazarus not only had died, but had been in the tomb four days: *"On his arrival, Jesus found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb for four days."* (John 11:17) How could there be hope now? Lazarus was not only "dead" but also "gone"! But Jesus, the Healer and bringer of resurrection and life, knew that He could overcome even this- all to God's glory!

1 Chronicles 26-27 May 29, 2014 John 11:18-46

1 Chroncles 26-27 is a simple list of the various groups of persons important for proper worship and survival. The lists are: 1) gate keepers (1Chron. 26:1-19) all were decendants of Korah and Merari; 2) treasurers and other officials (1 Chron. 26:20-32); 3) army divisions (1 Chron. 27:1-15); 4) leaders of the tribes (1 Chron. 27:16-24); and 5) the king's overseers (1 Chron. 27:25-34). The Chronicler notes that Davis had learned a valuable lesson in humility and dependence on the Lord alone, for he did not enumerate the men of the tribes of number of fighting men (1 Chron. 27:23-24): *"David did not take the number of the men twenty years old or less, because the Lord had promised to make Israel as numerous as the stars in the sky. Joab son of Zeruiah began to count the men but did not finish. God's wrath came on Israel on account of this numbering, and the number was not entered in the book of the annals of King David."*

The treasurers were responsible for a number of things: *"Some of the plunder taken in battle they dedicated for the repair of the temple of the Lord. And everything dedicated by Samuel the seer and by Saul son of Kish, Abner son of Ner and Joab son of Zeruiah, and all the other dedicated things were in the care of Shelomith and his relatives."* (1 Chron. 26:27-28) Those "dedicated" items were to be used

exclusively by (or for) the Lord. The men chosen for these various tasks related to the temple were carefully selected, they were persons that were: 1) capable (1 Chron. 26:6); 2) able (1 Chron. 26:7), and 3) with the strength to do the work (1 Chron. 26:8). One was described as a "wise counselor" (1 Chron. 26:14)

The selection of those who would lead or serve is critical- both in ancient and modern times. The persons who were put into these positions had enormous responsibility, and ideally would see their office as service rather than privilege. Only with trusted leadership, who themselves trust and rely on God for everything, is there true peace and prosperity!

John 11:18-46

When Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead, it triggered several events: first, it returned a friend and a brother to life with great rejoicing; second, it provided yet another sign of Jesus' special place in the Godhead- it was a clear testimony of His divinity; and lastly, it spurred the enemies of the Lord to begin a serious plot against Him. Lazarus had been in the tomb four days. It has always struck a chord with me that even though Jesus knew He had the power to, and would raise Lazarus from the dead- He still missed him as a fiend and "Jesus wept" (John 11:35). This to ma is a perfect picyure of the divine and human Jesus- seen together "all at once"!

Martha was proactive- she went to see Jesus while Mary stayed behind, and she tols Jesus she believed He could save or resurrect her brother Lazarus: *When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went out to meet him, but Mary stayed at home. "Lord," Martha said to Jesus, "if you had been here, my brother would not have died. But I know that even now God will give you whatever you ask." Jesus said to her, "Your brother will rise again." Martha answered, "I know he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day." Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live, even though they die; and whoever lives by believing in me will never die. Do you believe this?"*

"Yes, Lord," she replied, "I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, who is to come into the world." (John 11:20-27) And Martha expressed her faith that Jesus was who He said He was- the very Son of God and the Messiah!

Now it was Mary's turn to seek Jesus: *"When Mary reached the place where Jesus was and saw him, she fell at his feet and said, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who had come along with her also weeping, he was deeply moved in spirit and troubled. "Where have you laid him?" he asked. "Come and see, Lord," they replied. Jesus wept. Then the Jews said, "See how he loved him!" But some of them said, "Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?"* (John 11:32-37) It would have been enough for Jesus to prevent Lazarus from dying, but now He would do more, and bring his friend back to life!

The time had come for the miracle that would glorify God, and show His power over death itself: *"Jesus, once more deeply moved, came to the tomb. It was a cave with a stone laid across the entrance. "Take away the stone," he said. "But, Lord," said Martha, the sister of the dead man, "by this time there is a bad odor, for he has been there four days." Then Jesus said, "Did I not tell you that if you believe, you will see the glory of God?" So they took away the stone. Then Jesus looked up and said, "Father, I thank you that you have heard me. I knew that you always hear me, but I said this for the benefit of the people standing here, that they may believe that you sent me." When he had said this, Jesus called in a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out!" The dead man came out, his hands and feet wrapped with strips of linen, and a cloth around his face. Jesus said to them, "Take off the grave clothes and let him go."* (John 11:38-44) My son Ben is fond of saying that if Jesus had simply said "come out" that literally thousands would have been raised up from their graves at that moment- He said instead, Lazarus, come out. And God's glory and powere were demonstrated to all those who saw and would hear.

And almost immediately, some of the witnesses, instead of gaining faith and confidence in God and His Son, reported what had happened to the Pharisees: *"Therefore many of the Jews who had come to visit Mary, and had seen what Jesus did, believed in him. But some of them went to the Pharisees and told them what Jesus had done."* (John 11:45-46). The next step was to meet and set a plot to eliminate the One who conquered death- as soon as possible!

zionhears.blogspot.com-Jesus Raises Lazarus

1 Chronicles 28-29 May 30, 2014 John 11:47-57

David wanted to make certain of two things: 1) that the people under his leadership would continue to love, serve and obey God, and 2) that the crown would go to David's son Solomon. He gathered the "key people" around him to encourage them on these two key points: *"So now I charge you in the sight of all Israel and of the assembly of the Lord, and in the hearing of our God: Be careful to follow all the commands of the Lord your God, that you may possess this good land and pass it on as an inheritance to your descendants forever. "And you, my son Solomon, acknowledge the God of your father, and serve him with wholehearted devotion and with a willing mind, for the Lord searches every heart and understands every desire and every thought. If you seek him, he will be found by you; but if you forsake him, he will reject you forever. Consider now, for the Lord has chosen you to build a house as the sanctuary. Be strong and do the work."* (1 Chron. 28:8-10). David ahd desired to build the Temple himself, but this plan was rejected by God because David was told: *'You are not to build a house for my Name, because you are a warrior and have shed blood.'* (1 Chron. 28:3b).

God had provided His servant David a plan in great detail, and gave David understanding of this plan- it was to be passed on to Solomon in written form: *"All this," David said, "I have in writing as a result of the Lord's hand on me, and he enabled me to understand all the details of the plan." David also said to Solomon his son, "Be strong and courageous, and do the work. Do not be afraid or discouraged, for the Lord God, my God, is with you. He will not fail you or forsake you until all the work for the service of the temple of the Lord is finished. The divisions of the priests and Levites are ready for all the work on the temple of God, and every willing person skilled in any craft will help you in all the work. The officials and all the people will obey your every command."* (1 Chron. 28:19-21) Details are important! God made certain that nothing was left to chance in the building of the Temple. God also is interested in the smallest details of our lives- each part and event is there for our benefit, our developing understanding, and for your spiritual growth…God is the God of details.

And then the prople were given an opportunity to experience the joy of giving. I am always reminded when on this subject of the Rev. Dr. Lester Rumble, who used words "correctly" but a little out of sync with modern usage. His comment was "Giving should be a hilarious experience". My cynical brother Jonathan asked if we should then laugh uproariously when the collection plate goes by in worship. The people of God were joyful and generous- not a surprising link: *"Then the leaders of families, the officers of the tribes of Israel, the commanders of thousands and commanders of hundreds, and the officials in charge of the king's work gave willingly. They gave toward the work on the temple of God five thousand talents and ten thousand darics of gold, ten thousand talents of silver, eighteen thousand talents of bronze and a hundred thousand talents[h] of iron. Anyone who had precious stones gave them to the treasury of the temple of the Lord in the custody of Jehiel the Gershonite. The people rejoiced at the willing response of their leaders, for they had given freely and wholeheartedly to the Lord. David the king also rejoiced greatly."* (1 Chron. 29:6-9).

David then led the prople in a beautiful prayer praising God:

"Praise be to you, Lord,

the God of our father Israel,
from everlasting to everlasting.
Yours, Lord, is the greatness and the power
and the glory and the majesty and the splendor,
for everything in heaven and earth is yours.
Yours, Lord, is the kingdom;
you are exalted as head over all.
Wealth and honor come from you;
you are the ruler of all things.
In your hands are strength and power
to exalt and give strength to all.
Now, our God, we give you thanks,
and praise your glorious name." (1 Chron 29:10b-13).

Solomon was acknowledged as king, and God had given a conditional promise to him and the line of David: "*I will establish his kingdom forever if he is unswerving in carrying out my commands and laws, as is being done at this time.*' (1 Chron. 28:7) For a time, there was glory and power and peace in Israel: *"The Lord highly exalted Solomon in the sight of all Israel and bestowed on him royal splendor such as no king over Israel ever had before."* (1 Chron. 29:25). God's covenant to keep David's line on the throne met its ultimate fulfilment in Jesus, in the line of David. He is the eternal King and will rule forever.

David then passed from the earth after ruling "forty years" in Israel over a united kingdom (1 Chron. 29:27), and some of the records of his ruke were kept in books that are now lost to us:
"As for the events of King David's reign, from beginning to end, they are written in the records of Samuel the seer, the records of Nathan the prophet and the records of Gad the seer, together with the details of his reign and power, and the circumstances that surrounded him and Israel and the kingdoms of all the other lands." (1 Chron. 29:29-30) See: http://www.icr.org/books/defenders/2204/

John 11:47-57

The plot against Jesus was led by Caiphus, the high priest. He had prophesied that Jesus must be sacrificed to "save the people" from Rome: *"He did not say this on his own, but as high priest that year he prophesied that Jesus would die for the Jewish nation"* (John 11:51). The other Jewish leaders had their issues with Jesus as well: "Then the chief priests and the Pharisees called a meeting of the Sanhedrin. *"What are we accomplishing?" they asked. "Here is this man performing many signs. If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and then the Romans will come and take away both our temple and our nation." Then one of them, named Caiaphas, who was high priest that year, spoke up, "You know nothing at all! You do not realize that it is better for you that one man die for the people than that the whole nation perish."* (John 11:47-50). How convenient for them, and what a great rationalization to destroy this One who was a constant reminder of their fragile nature of their power and influence, and how drastically Rome could act to curtail their religious freedoms.

So the "word" went out that Jesus was to be reported if he appeared in public, and Jesus decided to keep a much lowere profile as the Passover approached: *"Therefore*

Jesus no longer moved about publicly among the people of Judea. Instead he withdrew to a region near the wilderness, to a village called Ephraim, where he stayed with his disciples. When it was almost time for the Jewish Passover, many went up from the country to Jerusalem for their ceremonial cleansing before the Passover. They kept looking for Jesus, and as they stood in the temple courts they asked one another, "What do you think? Isn't he coming to the festival at all?" But the chief priests and the Pharisees had given orders that anyone who found out where Jesus was should report it so that they might arrest him." (John 11:54-57). Jesus was, however, to appear at that Passover celebration.

2 Chronicles 1-3 May 31, 2014 John 12:1-19

After Solomon had offered a thousand burnt offerings to the Lord, he was asked an important question: *"Ask for whatever you want me to give you."* (2 Chron. 1:7) This is similar to the question Jesus asked the blind man (Mark 10:51) "What do you want me to do for you?" The answer is important- it reveals the very core of what we need- or what we believe that we need most of all. In the case of the blind man, the answer was obvious. It was less obvious what the answer to God's question to Solomon would be. And Solomon showed wisdom by asking for wisdom: *"Solomon answered God, "You have shown great kindness to David my father and have made me king in his place. Now, Lord God, let your promise to my father David be confirmed, for you have made me king over a people who are as numerous as the dust of the earth. Give me wisdom and knowledge, that I may lead this people, for who is able to govern this great people of yours?" God said to Solomon, "Since this is your heart's desire and you have not asked for wealth, possessions or honor, nor for the death of your enemies, and since you have not asked for a long life but for wisdom and knowledge to govern my people over whom I have made you king, therefore wisdom and knowledge will be given you. And I will also give you wealth, possessions and honor, such as no king who was before you ever had and none after you will have."* (2 Chron 1:8-12). Notice that God provides what Solomon has asked for, and being a generous and gracious God who delights in giving gifts to His children, (Matthew 7:11) He gives also what was not asked for!

Solomon gave detailed instructions to the craftsmen and builders who were to undertake the enormous task of constructing a Temple fir for God's very presence among the people. He used his connections and relationships wisely, and asked his neighbor to the north, Hiram king of Tyre, for building materials- especially timber- and for skilled craftsmaen to conduct the work: *"Solomon gave orders to build a temple for the Name of the Lord and a royal palace for himself. He conscripted 70,000 men as carriers and 80,000 as stonecutters in the hills and 3,600 as foremen over them. Solomon sent this message to Hiram king of Tyre: "Send me cedar logs as you did for my father David when you sent him cedar to build a palace to live in. Now I am about to build a temple for the Name of the Lord my God and to dedicate it to him for burning fragrant incense before him, for setting out the consecrated bread regularly, and for making burnt offerings every morning and evening and on the Sabbaths, at the New Moons and at the appointed festivals of the Lord our God. This is a lasting ordinance for Israel. "The temple I am going to build will be great, because our God is greater than all other gods. But who is able*

to build a temple for him, since the heavens, even the highest heavens, cannot contain him? Who then am I to build a temple for him, except as a place to burn sacrifices before him? "Send me, therefore, a man skilled to work in gold and silver, bronze and iron, and in purple, crimson and blue yarn, and experienced in the art of engraving, to work in Judah and Jerusalem with my skilled workers, whom my father David provided. "Send me also cedar, juniper and algum[g] logs from Lebanon, for I know that your servants are skilled in cutting timber there. My servants will work with yours to provide me with plenty of lumber, because the temple I build must be large and magnificent. I will give your servants, the woodsmen who cut the timber, twenty thousand cors[h] of ground wheat, twenty thousand cors of barley, twenty thousand baths of wine and twenty thousand baths of olive oil." (2 Chron. 2:1-10). The structure was to be magnificent and permanent, just as God was. No expense was to be spared, no craftman's skill untapped for what was to be the center of worship of the One true God.

Solomon took census of those "foreigners" sent to him, and assigneed them tasks according to their skill, experience and training*: "Solomon took a census of all the foreigners residing in Israel, after the census his father David had taken; and they were found to be 153,600. **18** He assigned 70,000 of them to be carriers and 80,000 to be stonecutters in the hills, with 3,600 foremen over them to keep the people working."* (2 Chron. 2:17-18).

The Temple was built at the site of the former altar made by David on the threshing floor of Araunah, which David had purchased. The time span of the actual building project itself was long, it began I the fourth year of Solomon's reign: "Then Solomon began to build the temple of the LORD in Jerusalem on Mount Moriah, where the LORD had appeared to his father David. It was on the threshing floor of Araunah the Jebusite, the place provided by David. He began building on the second day of the second month in the fourth year of his reign." (2 Chron. 3:1-2) Only the finest materials, gold from Parvaim (http://www.answers.com/topic/parvaim) and purple- the rare and costly royal pigment- were to be used: *"He overlaid the inside with pure gold. He paneled the main hall with juniper and covered it with fine gold and decorated it with palm tree and chain designs. He adorned the temple with precious stones. And the gold he used was gold of Parvaim. He overlaid the ceiling beams, doorframes, walls and doors of the temple with gold, and he carved cherubim on the walls. He built the Most Holy Place, its length corresponding to the width of the temple—twenty cubits long and twenty cubits wide. He overlaid the inside with six hundred talents of fine gold. The gold nails weighed fifty shekels.[p] He also overlaid the upper parts with gold. For the Most Holy Place he made a pair of sculptured cherubim and overlaid them with gold. The total wingspan of the cherubim was twenty cubits. One wing of the first cherub was five cubits long and touched the temple wall, while its other wing, also five cubits long, touched the wing of the other cherub. Similarly one wing of the second cherub was five cubits long and touched the other temple wall, and its other wing, also five cubits long, touched the wing of the first cherub. The wings of these cherubim extended twenty cubits. They stood on their feet, facing the main hall. He made the curtain of blue, purple and crimson yarn and fine linen, with cherubim worked into it."* (2 Chron. 3:4b-14)

John 12:1-19

Jesus goes to the Passover celebration in Jerusalem, despite the growing opposition to Him and His ministry. While in nearby Bethany, Jesus is anointed with precious perfume. This event is recoded in all the gospels (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anointing_of_Jesus). Many feel this was a symbolic preparation of Jesus' body for its later burial, as mentioned in matthew and Mark's accounts of this incident. Judas, the treasurer- and also an embezzler (verse 6)- objected to this display but was rebuked by Jesus: "*Six days before the Passover, Jesus came to Bethany, where Lazarus lived, whom Jesus had raised from the dead. Here a dinner was given in Jesus' honor. Martha served, while Lazarus was among those reclining at the table with him. Then Mary took about a pint of pure nard, an expensive perfume; she poured it on Jesus' feet and wiped his feet with her hair. And the house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume. But one of his disciples, Judas Iscariot, who was later to betray him, objected, "Why wasn't this perfume sold and the money given to the poor? It was worth a year's wages." He did not say this because he cared about the poor but because he was a thief; as keeper of the money bag, he used to help himself to what was put into it. "Leave her alone," Jesus replied. "It was intended that she should save this perfume for the day of my burial. You will always have the poor among you, but you will not always have me."* (John 12:1-8). Interestingly, the crowd wanted to see Lazarus as well as Jesus, and Lazarus' presence caused many to believe. Jesus' enemies even plotted to kill Lazarus as well for this very reason: "*Meanwhile a large crowd of Jews found out that Jesus was there and came, not only because of him but also to see Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. So the chief priests made plans to kill Lazarus as well, for on account of Lazarus many of the Jews were going over to Jesus and believing in him.*" (John 12:9-11).

When Jesus later entered Jerusalem. A "great crowd" was there. Did they understand at all who this "king" was? Did these same people who cried "Hosannah" later cry out for Hus crucifixion? Did Jesus' disciples really comprehend that their Master was headed directly into a deadly confrontation, and that they would sson be disheartened, afraid and scattered? And yet Jesus' moment of public glory now reached its zenith: "*The next day the great crowd that had come for the festival heard that Jesus was on his way to Jerusalem. They took palm branches and went out to meet him, shouting,*
"Hosanna"
"Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!"
"Blessed is the king of Israel!"
Jesus found a young donkey and sat on it, as it is written:

"Do not be afraid, Daughter Zion;
see, your king is coming,
seated on a donkey's colt."
At first his disciples did not understand all this. Only after Jesus was glorified did they realize that these things had been written about him and that these things had been done to him." (John 12:12-16).

And the crowds grew, not only because this man Jesus was here in Jerusalem, but that the one Jesus had wraised from the dead was here also with Him: *"Now the*

crowd that was with him when he called Lazarus from the tomb and raised him from the dead continued to spread the word. Many people, because they had heard that he had performed this sign, went out to meet him. So the Pharisees said to one another, "See, this is getting us nowhere. Look how the whole world has gone after him!" (John 12:17-19)

Life of Jesus- Jesus Enters Jerusalem

2 Chronicles 4-6 June 1, 2014 John 12:20-50

The furnishings of the temple merited equal attention to detail as the rest of this magnificent structure. Solomon gave careful and detailed instructions both as to the materials and the specifications and plans for each item (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Solomon's_Temple). The bronze altar and bulls (2 Chron. 4:1-3); the "Sea" which held three thousand baths – about 136 cubic meters (2 Chron. 4:4-5); ten basins, lampstands and tables (2 Chron. 4:6-8), as well as pots, shovels and sprinkling bowls (2 Chron. 4:11). A number of items were made by Solomon of pure gold (2 Chron. 4:19-22). When all these items had been fabricated, they were stored in the treasury: *"When all the work Solomon had done for the temple of the Lord was finished, he brought in the things his father David had dedicated—the silver and gold and all the furnishings—and he placed them in the treasuries of God's temple."* (2 Chron. 5:1)

The Ark was then brought to the inner temple in the presence of the priests and leaders of the people: *"Then Solomon summoned to Jerusalem the elders of Israel, all the heads of the tribes and the chiefs of the Israelite families, to bring up the ark of the Lord's covenant from Zion, the City of David. And all the Israelites came*

together to the king at the time of the festival in the seventh month. When all the elders of Israel had arrived, the Levites took up the ark, and they brought up the ark and the tent of meeting and all the sacred furnishings in it. The Levitical priests carried them up; and King Solomon and the entire assembly of Israel that had gathered about him were before the ark, sacrificing so many sheep and cattle that they could not be recorded or counted. The priests then brought the ark of the Lord's covenant to its place in the inner sanctuary of the temple, the Most Holy Place, and put it beneath the wings of the cherubim. The cherubim spread their wings over the place of the ark and covered the ark and its carrying poles. These poles were so long that their ends, extending from the ark, could be seen from in front of the inner sanctuary, but not from outside the Holy Place; and they are still there today. There was nothing in the ark except the two tablets that Moses had placed in it at Horeb, where the Lord made a covenant with the Israelites after they came out of Egypt." (2 Chron. 5:2-10) There was music and joyful singing "The trumpeters and musicians joined in unison to give praise and thanks to the Lord. Accompanied by trumpets, cymbals and other instruments, the singers raised their voices in praise to the Lord and sang: "He is good; his love endures forever." (2 Chron. 5:13a). And the very presence of God- described here as a "cloud" filled the Temple: *"Then the temple of the Lord was filled with the cloud, and the priests could not perform their service because of the cloud, for the glory of the Lord filled the temple of God."* (2 Chron. 5:13b-14)

God's people believed that God literally dwelt in the Temple in a special way, and they were ready to express their praise and gratitude to God: "*While the whole assembly of Israel was standing there, the king turned around and blessed them. Then he said: "Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel, who with his hands has fulfilled what he promised with his mouth to my father David. For he said, 'Since the day I brought my people out of Egypt, I have not chosen a city in any tribe of Israel to have a temple built so that my Name might be there, nor have I chosen anyone to be ruler over my people Israel. But now I have chosen Jerusalem for my Name to be there, and I have chosen David to rule my people Israel.'* (2 Chron. 6:3-6).

The Solomon prayed a beautiful prayer of dedication of the Temple of God (2 Chron. 6:14-42). In this prayer God is praised for His might and "largeness"- the "highest heavens cannot contain you" (2 Chron. 6:18-19); His justice (2 Chron. 6:24-26); and His forgiveness (2 Chron. 6:39). The culmination of the prayer is especially moving to me: *"Now, my God, may your eyes be open and your ears attentive to the prayers offered in this place.*

"Now arise, Lord God, and come to your resting place,
you and the ark of your might.
May your priests, Lord God, be clothed with salvation,
may your faithful people rejoice in your goodness.
Lord God, do not reject your anointed one.
Remember the great love promised to David your servant." (2 Chron. 6:40-42)

John 12:20-50

"We would like to see Jesus" (John 12:21) – the statement by the "Greeks" who were visiting Jerusalem at the time of the Pssover celebration have been echoed by many others down through the years. Where is Jesus? Is he in your life, does He show through in your love for others and your sacrificial living? Can He come into my life, too? And Jesus was visible then in the fleshm, and now in His fiollowers who are busy doing the *"greater things"* that Jesus promised they would do (John 14:12).

And Now the time had come for Jesus to be glorified- to be seen for who He really was- the Messiah, the promised and long awaited One, who would take away the sins of the world (John 1:29). Jesus said*: "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. Very truly I tell you, unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds. Anyone who loves their life will lose it, while anyone who hates their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. Whoever serves me must follow me; and where I am, my servant also will be. My Father will honor the one who serves me. "Now my soul is troubled, and what shall I say? 'Father, save me from this hour'? No, it was for this very reason I came to this hour. Father, glorify your name!" Then a voice came from heaven, "I have glorified it, and will glorify it again." The crowd that was there and heard it said it had thundered; others said an angel had spoken to him."* (John 12:23b-29). Jesus knew the price He would have to pay- and His soul was "troubled", but He had already decided that this sacrifice was the "very reason I came to this hour". He was willing to lay down His life for all, for you and for me. What a Savior!

The great work of the cross was not only to save and redeem but to overcome the evil one: *"Now is the time for judgment on this world; now the prince of this world will be driven out. And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself." He said this to show the kind of death he was going to die. The crowd spoke up, "We have heard from the Law that the Messiah will remain forever, so how can you say, 'The Son of Man must be lifted up'? Who is this 'Son of Man'?" Then Jesus told them, "You are going to have the light just a little while longer. Walk while you have the light, before darkness overtakes you. Whoever walks in the dark does not know where they are going. Believe in the light while you have the light, so that you may become children of light." When he had finished speaking, Jesus left and hid himself from them."* (John 12:31-36) Just as Moses lifted up the bronze serpent in the wilderness and saved his people from the venomous snakes, the Son of Man would be lifted up and draw men to Himself to be healed and saved!

Some believed, and many did not. Jesus pointed to the prophecy in Isaiah as to the reason why this was true: "*Even after Jesus had performed so many signs in their presence, they still would not believe in him. "This was to fulfill the word of Isaiah the prophet:*

"Lord, who has believed our message
and to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed?"
For this reason they could not believe, because, as Isaiah says elsewhere:

"He has blinded their eyes
and hardened their hearts,
so they can neither see with their eyes,

nor understand with their hearts,
nor turn—and I would heal them."
Isaiah said this because he saw Jesus' glory and spoke about him." (John 12:37-41, quoting Isaiah 53:1 and 6:10)

Some believed but were careful not to let others know, because they did not want to be rejected or ostracized: *"Yet at the same time many even among the leaders believed in him. But because of the Pharisees they would not openly acknowledge their faith for fear they would be put out of the synagogue; for they loved human praise more than praise from God."* (John 12:42-43). However, this kind of "faith" does not bring great rewards as open and honest faith does- as Jesus taught (Matthew 10:32; Luke 12:38) *"Whoever acknowledges me before others, I will also acknowledge before my Father in heaven."*

The Jesus identifies His unique unity with God, and the fact that His words are the words His father has taught Him to say*: "Then Jesus cried out, "Whoever believes in me does not believe in me only, but in the one who sent me. The one who looks at me is seeing the one who sent me. I have come into the world as a light, so that no one who believes in me should stay in darkness."* (John 12:44-46) and: *"If anyone hears my words but does not keep them, I do not judge that person. For I did not come to judge the world, but to save the world. There is a judge for the one who rejects me and does not accept my words; the very words I have spoken will condemn them at the last day. For I did not speak on my own, but the Father who sent me commanded me to say all that I have spoken. I know that his command leads to eternal life. So whatever I say is just what the Father has told me to say."* (John 12:47-50)

2 Chronicles 7-9 June 2, 2014 John 13:1-17

Today (actually I'm writing this on May 30th) is the 30th anniversary of the day I promised my beautiful, godly, green eyed, blond, lovely wife that I would love and care for her, protect her and share with her the honor of my name- "keeping only unto her". God's second greatest gift (the first was my totally undeserved salvation) to me- also undeserved- was a chance (a second chance after a failed marriage) at true fulfilment, happiness and abiding joy. I have been so blessed by her, and humbled by her beautiful heart and kind spirit- she is the "delight of my life" and the fulfilment of the promise made in Psalm 37:4 (Delight thyself also in the Lord: and he shall give thee the desires of thine heart. KJV). He has certainly kept that promise, beyond anything I could ask or imagine. I thank God for my precious Carol every day!

Solomon was extravagant in his praise and thanksgiving- he offered God the best that he could make – a beautiful structure fitting to the majesty and kingship of God. Solomon's dedication was a true masure of the desires of his heart- to praise, honor, glorify and obey God. One of the most quoted verses in Scripture comes to us in this chapter of 2 Chronicles- 2 Chron. 7:14: *"if my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and I will forgive their sin and will heal their land."* The context today was slightly different that that of the time God spoke these words, but the truth is the same. If our nation- these United States- is willing

to humble itself and pray, and truly allow God to be the very center of our devotion, then he will again keep His promise and bless us! Solomon praised God by using a song/psalm that is seen elsewhere many times in the Scriptures (especially Psalm 136): *"He is good; his love endures forever."* (2 Chron. 7:3b) It was a long celebration, and no one seemed to complain about the length of the service: *"So Solomon observed the festival at that time for seven days, and all Israel with him—a vast assembly, people from Lebo Hamath to the Wadi of Egypt. On the eighth day they held an assembly, for they had celebrated the dedication of the altar for seven days and the festival for seven days more. On the twenty-third day of the seventh month he sent the people to their homes, joyful and glad in heart for the good things the Lord had done for David and Solomon and for his people Israel."* (2 Chron. 7:8-10).

As happens so often, after God's people praise Him, he appears in wonderful, special and at many times, unexpected ways (Serendipity is the delight of our God!). He spoke to Solomon, obviously pleased with the enthusiasm and genuine love of God shown in worship, but knowing the ways of His people, He also warned them to keep His commands and laws: *"When Solomon had finished the temple of the Lord and the royal palace, and had succeeded in carrying out all he had in mind to do in the temple of the Lord and in his own palace, the Lord appeared to him at night and said: "I have heard your prayer and have chosen this place for myself as a temple for sacrifices. "When I shut up the heavens so that there is no rain, or command locusts to devour the land or send a plague among my people, if my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and I will forgive their sin and will heal their land. Now my eyes will be open and my ears attentive to the prayers offered in this place. I have chosen and consecrated this temple so that my Name may be there forever. My eyes and my heart will always be there. "As for you, if you walk before me faithfully as David your father did, and do all I command, and observe my decrees and laws, I will establish your royal throne, as I covenanted with David your father when I said, 'You shall never fail to have a successor to rule over Israel.' "But if you turn away and forsake the decrees and commands I have given you[b] and go off to serve other gods and worship them, then I will uproot Israel from my land, which I have given them, and will reject this temple I have consecrated for my Name. I will make it a byword and an object of ridicule among all peoples. This temple will become a heap of rubble. All[c] who pass by will be appalled and say, 'Why has the Lord done such a thing to this land and to this temple?' People will answer, 'Because they have forsaken the Lord, the God of their ancestors, who brought them out of Egypt, and have embraced other gods, worshiping and serving them—that is why he brought all this disaster on them.'"* (2 Chron. 7:11-22). How conveniently we forget God's warnings about the consequences of our unfaithfulness! How easily we remember the promise of His blessing. Our unfaithfulness has consequences!

It is interesting to me that Solomon would not allow his Egyptian wife to live in a place that was made holy by the presence of the Ark. He instead built a separate place for her to live: "*Solomon brought Pharaoh's daughter up from the City of David to the palace he had built for her, for he said, "My wife must not live in the palace of David king of Israel, because the places the ark of the LORD has entered are holy."* (2 Chron. 8:11). If Solomon had been as careful in his selection of "many

wives" as he was in the place his Egyptian wife was to stay, then perhaps he would not have been distracted and led astray from God. The downfall of Solomon's reign was infortunately his forgetting the first commandment- "No other gods before me!" When Solomon, for political reasons, made wives (and alliances) with foreign powers he lost his sole focus on God (1 Kings 11).

The Queen of Sheba had heard about Solomon's glory, power and wisdom, and wanted to see "for herself" the reality of this king and kingdom. So she visited Solomon and was greatly impressed: *"She said to the king, "The report I heard in my own country about your achievements and your wisdom is true. But I did not believe what they said until I came and saw with my own eyes. Indeed, not even half the greatness of your wisdom was told me; you have far exceeded the report I heard. How happy your people must be! How happy your officials, who continually stand before you and hear your wisdom! Praise be to the Lord your God, who has delighted in you and placed you on his throne as king to rule for the Lord your God. Because of the love of your God for Israel and his desire to uphold them forever, he has made you king over them, to maintain justice and righteousness."* (2 Chron. 9:5-8) What she saw was a testimony not so much to Solomon himself, but to the glorious and wise God who gave Solomon all the many gifts and blessings that he received.

The splendor of Solomon and his Temple was indeed great, and marked the high point of God's blessings to the ancient Israel: *"King Solomon was greater in riches and wisdom than all the other kings of the earth. All the kings of the earth sought audience with Solomon to hear the wisdom God had put in his heart. Year after year, everyone who came brought a gift—articles of silver and gold, and robes, weapons and spices, and horses and mules."* (2 Chron. 9:22-24). Solomon enjoyed a long reign, and there was peace and prosperity in the land. Infortunately, this power and prestige was short lived: *"As for the other events of Solomon's reign, from beginning to end, are they not written in the records of Nathan the prophet, in the prophecy of Ahijah the Shilonite and in the visions of Iddo the seer concerning Jeroboam son of Nebat? Solomon reigned in Jerusalem over all Israel forty years. Then he rested with his ancestors and was buried in the city of David his father. And Rehoboam his son succeeded him as king."* (2 Chron. 9:29-31)

John 13:1-17

John 13 opens with an intriguing statement: *"Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end."* (John 13:1b). Jesus' love is a forever love- he does not abandon us, but is "with" us- in fact, God and he are the same- the Ones who are always and ever "with" us!

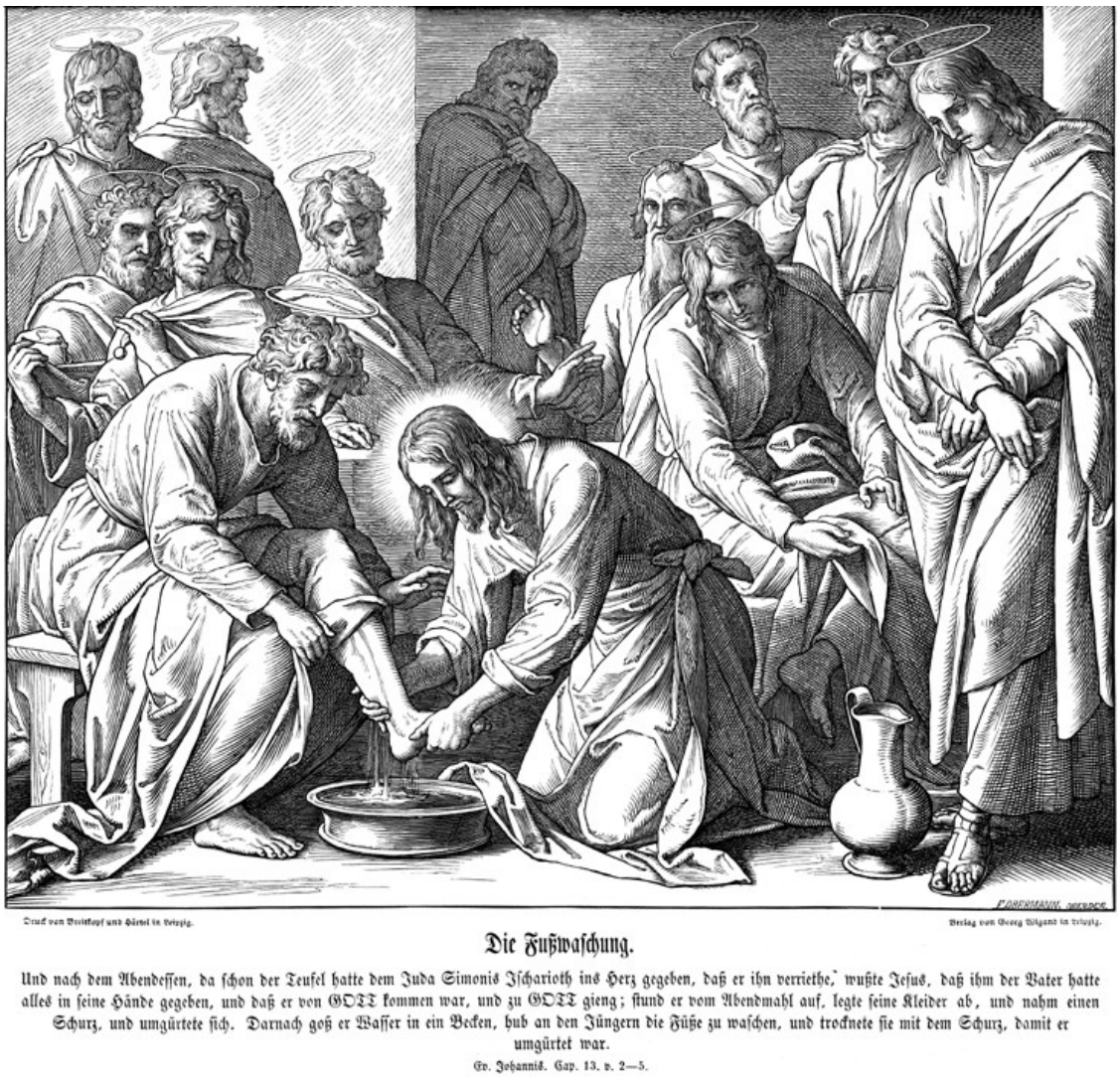
The betrayal is about to take place, but Jesus goes on in His love for all the disciples- including the one who saw fit to "turn Him in" and arranged to betray Him with a kiss. In John 18:5, we see Judas simply "standing there" as recorded in John's gospel: *(And Judas the traitor was standing there with them.)* John 18:5b- the kiss is portrayed in Luke 22:47-49: *"but Jesus asked him, "Judas, are you betraying the Son of Man with a kiss?"* (Luke 22:48) Some critics of God's Word will point to these and similar instances where the narrative is "inconsistent". "Well, did Judas kiss Jesus or not?" they might ask. The truth is that eyewitness accounts differ- different

obsrvers of the seme event describe the events in sometimes very dissimilar ways. And sometimes the writer is emphasizing a part of the story, while another would leave it out completely. It's not unreasonable that Judas did indeed "stand there" either before or after the betrayal with a kiss!

Two thinsg stand out as importan in the next part of the narrative: *"The evening meal was in progress, and the devil had already prompted Judas, the son of Simon Iscariot, to betray Jesus. Jesus knew that the Father had put all things under his power, and that he had come from God and was returning to God; so he got up from the meal, took off his outer clothing, and wrapped a towel around his waist. After that, he poured water into a basin and began to wash his disciples' feet, drying them with the towel that was wrapped around him."* (John 13:2-5). Note that "the devil" propmpted Judas, and that in some people's estimations relieves Judas of at least part of the guilt of his betrayal. Judas did, however, have free will and could have resisted! (James 4:7). Jesus knew that 'all things" were under His control, and that freed Him for service. We should serve also, knowing we enjoy God's protection and favor.

Then Jesus washes the disciples' feet. In those times, the feet got exceptionally dirty- and washing the feet was a "dirty job" that most who had servants assigned to them. Jesus showed by His actions and attitude that He was indeed a servant to all. The conversation between Jesus and Peter was typical- Peter always seems to want the "last word" and is both impulsive and comical at the same time. He finally understood that Jesus was doing what He should- and what God called Him to do- not what Peter wanted: *"He came to Simon Peter, who said to him, "Lord, are you going to wash my feet?" Jesus replied, "You do not realize now what I am doing, but later you will understand." "No," said Peter, "you shall never wash my feet." Jesus answered, "Unless I wash you, you have no part with me." "Then, Lord," Simon Peter replied, "not just my feet but my hands and my head as well!" Jesus answered, "Those who have had a bath need only to wash their feet; their whole body is clean. And you are clean, though not every one of you." For he knew who was going to betray him, and that was why he said not every one was clean."* (John 13:6-11).

The Jesus, making sure they understand what He has just done, tells them plainly about His servanthood, which He has just demonstated to them: *"When he had finished washing their feet, he put on his clothes and returned to his place. "Do you understand what I have done for you?" he asked them. "You call me 'Teacher' and 'Lord,' and rightly so, for that is what I am. Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another's feet. I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you. Very truly I tell you, no servant is greater than his master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him. Now that you know these things, you will be blessed if you do them."* (John 13:12-17). How blessed we are if we also "do them"!



Julius Schnorr von Carolsfeld's (1794-1872) depiction of Jesus washing the disciples' feet before Passover. Judas Iscariot is depicted in the back without a halo.

2 Chronicles 10-12 June 3, 2014 John 13:18-38

To rule with kindness and consideration, or with a heavy hand and in a burdensome way? This was the choice facing Rehoboam, Solomon's son. Just as Solomon had lost his way in taking "may wives", Rehoboam lost his way by taking bad advice- and he paisd the penalty for it- he ruled only over Judah: *"Rehoboam went to Shechem, for all Israel had gone there to make him king. When Jeroboam son of Nebat heard this (he was in Egypt, where he had fled from King Solomon), he returned from Egypt. So they sent for Jeroboam, and he and all Israel went to Rehoboam and said to him: "Your father put a heavy yoke on us, but now lighten the harsh labor and the heavy yoke he put on us, and we will serve you." Rehoboam answered, "Come back to me in three days." So the people went away.*

Then King Rehoboam consulted the elders who had served his father Solomon during his lifetime. "How would you advise me to answer these people?" he asked. They replied, "If you will be kind to these people and please them and give them a favorable answer, they will always be your servants." But Rehoboam rejected the advice the elders gave him and consulted the young men who had grown up with him and were serving him. He asked them, "What is your advice? How should we answer these people who say to me, 'Lighten the yoke your father put on us'?" The young men who had grown up with him replied, "The people have said to you, 'Your father put a heavy yoke on us, but make our yoke lighter.' Now tell them, 'My little finger is thicker than my father's waist. My father laid on you a heavy yoke; I will make it even heavier. My father scourged you with whips; I will scourge you with scorpions.'" Three days later Jeroboam and all the people returned to Rehoboam, as the king had said, "Come back to me in three days." The king answered them harshly. Rejecting the advice of the elders, he followed the advice of the young men and said, "My father made your yoke heavy; I will make it even heavier. My father scourged you with whips; I will scourge you with scorpions." So the king did not listen to the people, for this turn of events was from God, to fulfill the word the Lord had spoken to Jeroboam son of Nebat through Ahijah the Shilonite. When all Israel saw that the king refused to listen to them, they answered the king: "What share do we have in David, what part in Jesse's son? To your tents, Israel! Look after your own house, David!" So all the Israelites went home. But as for the Israelites who were living in the towns of Judah, Rehoboam still ruled over them." (2 Chron. 10:1-17) The people would have been servants with wise and fair treatment, but the impetuousness and stubbornness of Rehoboam led him to the exact opposite choice- he would lay heavy burdens on the people. One wonders why. Did Solomon's wisdom fail to be imparted to his son? Or was God simply showing Rehoboam the severe consequences of his misjudgment?

Once Rehoboam realized he had lost the loyalty of the people, he sent his "chief" of forced labor, Adoniram, to try to retain the Israelites who rejected Rehoboam- it was a desperate attempt, and the people stoned Adoniram to death! (2 Chron. 10:18) And Rehoboam himself barely escaped to Jerusalem (2 Chron. 10:19). As a last ditch attempt to reunite the people under his leadership, Rehoboam mustered an army to fight with his fellow Israelite. God, however, warned him against this and he abandoned this foolish plan (2 Chron. 11:1-4). Rehoboam did a few wise things, showing that perhaps some of his father's influence had taken root in him- he fortified the cities, consolidated his territories and put his brothers in charge of several parts of his kingdom: *"Rehoboam appointed Abijah son of Maakah as crown prince among his brothers, in order to make him king. He acted wisely, dispersing some of his sons throughout the districts of Judah and Benjamin, and to all the fortified cities. He gave them abundant provisions and took many wives for them"* (2 Chron. 11:22-23).

As happens so often with God's people, once they are comfortable and secure they no longer seek Him and seek to serve him. This is what happened to Rehoboam: *"After Rehoboam's position as king was established and he had become strong, he and all Israel with him abandoned the law of the LORD. Because they had been unfaithful to the LORD, Shishak king of Egypt attacked Jerusalem in the fifth year of King Rehoboam. With twelve hundred chariots and sixty thousand horsemen and the innumerable troops of Libyans, Sukkites and Cushites[c] that came with him from*

Egypt, he captured the fortified cities of Judah and came as far as Jerusalem. Then the prophet Shemaiah came to Rehoboam and to the leaders of Judah who had assembled in Jerusalem for fear of Shishak, and he said to them, "This is what the LORD says, 'You have abandoned me; therefore, I now abandon you to Shishak.'" The leaders of Israel and the king humbled themselves and said, "The LORD is just." When the LORD saw that they humbled themselves, this word of the LORD came to Shemaiah: "Since they have humbled themselves, I will not destroy them but will soon give them deliverance. My wrathwill not be poured out on Jerusalem through Shishak. They will, however, become subject to him, so that they may learn the difference between serving me and serving the kings of other lands." (2 Chron. 12:1-8)

Because Rehoboam humbled himself before God (finally!) God was just and did not toally destroy him or his kingdom. He did pay a heavy price for his arrogance and disobedience: *"Because Rehoboam humbled himself, the LORD's anger turned from him, and he was not totally destroyed. Indeed, there was some good in Judah. King Rehoboam established himself firmly in Jerusalem and continued as king. He was forty-one years old when he became king, and he reigned seventeen years in Jerusalem, the city the LORD had chosen out of all the tribes of Israel in which to put his Name. His mother's name was Naamah; she was an Ammonite. He did evil because he had not set his heart on seeking the LORD."* (2 Chron 12:12-14)

John 13:18-38

Jesus fulfilled an astonishing number of prophesies in His earthly ministry, birth and death. Another evidence that Jesus did not "contrive" to fulfil prophesy is the betrayal by Judas. Psalm 49:9 says:

"Even my close friend,
someone I trusted,
one who shared my bread,
has turned against me."

And that is exactly what happened! How could Jesus have "set up Judas" to do what he did? Do we really believe that Jesus somehow manuipulated Judas into betraying him? It is so much easier- and more in keeping with experience and reason- to simple see the prophetic fulfilment!

And how understandable human Jesus was- He was "troubled in spirit" as He announced to His closest friends and followers that one of them was a bretrayer, a traitor*: "After he had said this, Jesus was troubled in spirit and testified, "Very truly I tell you, one of you is going to betray me." His disciples stared at one another, at a loss to know which of them he meant. One of them, the disciple whom Jesus loved, was reclining next to him. Simon Peter motioned to this disciple and said, "Ask him which one he means." Leaning back against Jesus, he asked him, "Lord, who is it?" Jesus answered, "It is the one to whom I will give this piece of bread when I have dipped it in the dish." Then, dipping the piece of bread, he gave it to Judas, the son of Simon Iscariot. As soon as Judas took the bread, Satan entered into him. So Jesus told him, "What you are about to do, do quickly." But no one at the meal understood why Jesus said this to him. Since Judas had charge of the money, some thought Jesus was telling him to buy what was needed for the festival, or to give*

something to the poor. As soon as Judas had taken the bread, he went out. And it was night." (John 13:21-30) This is the scene depicted in Michaelangelo's masterpiece fresco, the Last Supper. Each of the disciples in their own way reacts to the horrible truth that Jesus has uttered. How could anyone betray the Master? How could I, in my darkest moment, turn against this wonderful teacher, Pastor, Healer and Friend? And yet one did- as "Satan entered him". Satan may have believed he had finally stopped his enemy, but the wonderful truth is that the very death Judas precipitated led to the final conquering of Satan, sin and death!

Salvador Dali, "Sacrament of the Last Supper" (1955)

Then- glorification, and another betrayal by the least likely disciple- "Peter the Rock". Jesus teaches His disciples about His glorification, and the bedrock of love- the new agape love that Jesus has so carefully explained ands modeled by His life. Then Peter is disbelieving about Jesus prediction of betrayal. *"I will lay down my life for you"* (John 13:37)- yet Jesus knows that uinder the unrelenting pressure that is to follow, Peter will do just that- betray him- and not once, but three times! The Scripture says: *When he was gone, Jesus said, "Now the Son of Man is glorified and God is glorified in him. If God is glorified in him, God will glorify the Son in himself, and will glorify him at once. "My children, I will be with you only a little longer. You will look for me, and just as I told the Jews, so I tell you now: Where I am going, you cannot come.*

"A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another."

Simon Peter asked him, "Lord, where are you going?" Jesus replied, "Where I am going, you cannot follow now, but you will follow later." Peter asked, "Lord, why

can't I follow you now? I will lay down my life for you." Then Jesus answered, "Will you really lay down your life for me? Very truly I tell you, before the rooster crows, you will disown me three times! (John 13:31-38). Notice the high standard for love that Jesus sets "as I have loved you". Is this possible?- only with God and with the filling of His Spirit!

2 Chronicles 13-16 June 4, 2014 John 14

Abijah king of Judah is the subject of 2 Chronicles 13. Abijah was drawn into confliuct with Jereboam, the king of Israel. The numbers were not in favor of Abijah- his 400,000 troopws were outnumber by twice that number of troops for Israel. And yet, when the battle was concluded, God's intervention allowed Abijah's troops to overcome numerically superior forces: *"Abijah stood on Mount Zemaraim, in the hill country of Ephraim, and said, "Jeroboam and all Israel, listen to me! Don't you know that the Lord, the God of Israel, has given the kingship of Israel to David and his descendants forever by a covenant of salt? Yet Jeroboam son of Nebat, an official of Solomon son of David, rebelled against his master. Some worthless scoundrels gathered around him and opposed Rehoboam son of Solomon when he was young and indecisive and not strong enough to resist them. "And now you plan to resist the kingdom of the Lord, which is in the hands of David's descendants. You are indeed a vast army and have with you the golden calves that Jeroboam made to be your gods. But didn't you drive out the priests of the Lord, the sons of Aaron, and the Levites, and make priests of your own as the peoples of other lands do? Whoever comes to consecrate himself with a young bull and seven rams may become a priest of what are not gods. "As for us, the Lord is our God, and we have not forsaken him. The priests who serve the Lord are sons of Aaron, and the Levites assist them. Every morning and evening they present burnt offerings and fragrant incense to the Lord. They set out the bread on the ceremonially clean table and light the lamps on the gold lampstand every evening. We are observing the requirements of the Lord our God. But you have forsaken him. God is with us; he is our leader. His priests with their trumpets will sound the battle cry against you. People of Israel, do not fight against the Lord, the God of your ancestors, for you will not succeed." Now Jeroboam had sent troops around to the rear, so that while he was in front of Judah the ambush was behind them. Judah turned and saw that they were being attacked at both front and rear. Then they cried out to the Lord. The priests blew their trumpets and the men of Judah raised the battle cry. At the sound of their battle cry, God routed Jeroboam and all Israel before Abijah and Judah. The Israelites fled before Judah, and God delivered them into their hands. Abijah and his troops inflicted heavy losses on them, so that there were five hundred thousand casualties among Israel's able men. The Israelites were subdued on that occasion, and the people of Judah were victorious because they relied on the Lord, the God of their ancestors."* (2 Chron. 13:4-18) The reason given for this unlikely outcome is that the people of Judah "relied on the Lord". And that made all the difference. Superior forces and military tactics can never overcome the intentions of out God and King! And to add an excalamation point, Abijah pursued Jereboam but God: *"struck him down and he died."* (2 Chron. 13:20b)

Next we see the story of Asa, king of Judah, who was a good king: *"Asa did what was good and right in the eyes of the Lord his God. He removed the foreign altars and*

the high places, smashed the sacred stones and cut down the Asherah poles. He commanded Judah to seek the Lord, the God of their ancestors, and to obey his laws and commands. He removed the high places and incense altars in every town in Judah, and the kingdom was at peace under him. He built up the fortified cities of Judah, since the land was at peace. No one was at war with him during those years, for the Lord gave him rest." (2 Chron 14:2-6) Note that God's "rest" follows obedience to Him and His laws!

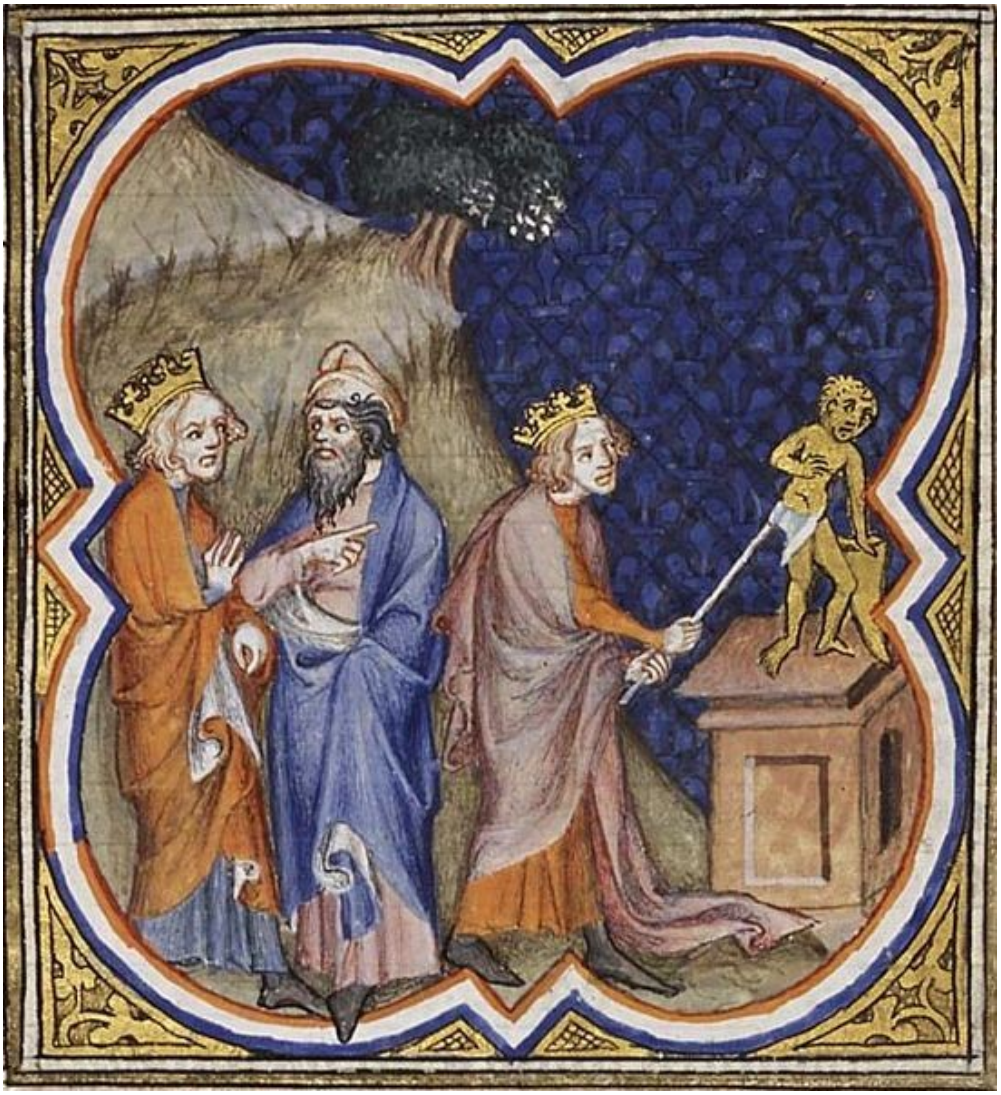


Illustration of Asa destroying the idols, in the Bible Historiale, 1372

Asa's first real challenge came from the south, in the form of Zerah the Cushite. The Cushite king had an enormous army, and three hundred chariots- akin to a modern "tank" in battle power. Yet God protected Asa and gave him victory: *Zerah the Cushite marched out against them with an army of thousands upon thousands and three hundred chariots, and came as far as Mareshah. Asa went out to meet him, and they took up battle positions in the Valley of Zephathah near Mareshah. Then Asa called to the LORD his God and said, "LORD, there is no one like you to help the powerless against the mighty. Help us, LORD our God, for we rely on you, and in*

your name we have come against this vast army. LORD, you are our God; do not let mere mortals prevail against you." The LORD struck down the Cushites before Asa and Judah. The Cushites fled, and Asa and his army pursued them as far as Gerar. Such a great number of Cushites fell that they could not recover; they were crushed before the LORD and his forces. The men of Judah carried off a large amount of plunder. They destroyed all the villages around Gerar, for the terror of the LORD had fallen on them. They looted all these villages, since there was much plunder there. They also attacked the camps of the herders and carried off droves of sheep and goats and camels. Then they returned to Jerusalem. (2 Chron. 14:9-15). Again, victory came to the army that went to battle in the Name of the Lord.

God wanted more in the way of dedication and devotion from Asa, sop He sent a Word to the prophet Azariah*:"The Spirit of God came on Azariah son of Oded. He went out to meet Asa and said to him, "Listen to me, Asa and all Judah and Benjamin. The Lord is with you when you are with him. If you seek him, he will be found by you, but if you forsake him, he will forsake you. For a long time Israel was without the true God, without a priest to teach and without the law. But in their distress they turned to the Lord, the God of Israel, and sought him, and he was found by them. In those days it was not safe to travel about, for all the inhabitants of the lands were in great turmoil. One nation was being crushed by another and one city by another, because God was troubling them with every kind of distress. But as for you, be strong and do not give up, for your work will be rewarded."* (2 Chron. 15:1-7). So Asa obeyed the Lord, and went about reforming the religious practices of the people: 1) he removed the "detestable idols" and 2) he repaired the altar of the Lord (2 Chron. 15:8). He gathered the people and demanded allegiance to God: *"They assembled at Jerusalem in the third month of the fifteenth year of Asa's reign. At that time they sacrificed to the Lord seven hundred head of cattle and seven thousand sheep and goats from the plunder they had brought back. They entered into a covenant to seek the Lord, the God of their ancestors, with all their heart and soul. All who would not seek the Lord, the God of Israel, were to be put to death, whether small or great, man or woman. They took an oath to the Lord with loud acclamation, with shouting and with trumpets and horns. All Judah rejoiced about the oath because they had sworn it wholeheartedly. They sought God eagerly, and he was found by them. So the Lord gave them rest on every side."* (2 Chron. 15:10-15)

However, in Asa's latter years, he did not fully trust God for deliverance from King Baasha of Israel by giving tribute to the Arameans, trusting in his own combined might. And God punished Asa for his lack of trust and reliance: *"At that time Hanani the seer came to Asa king of Judah and said to him: "Because you relied on the king of Aram and not on the Lord your God, the army of the king of Aram has escaped from your hand. Were not the Cushites and Libyans a mighty army with great numbers of chariots and horsemen? Yet when you relied on the Lord, he delivered them into your hand. For the eyes of the Lord range throughout the earth to strengthen those whose hearts are fully committed to him. You have done a foolish thing, and from now on you will be at war." Asa was angry with the seer because of this; he was so enraged that he put him in prison. At the same time Asa brutally oppressed some of the people*. (2 Chron. 15:7-10). How could Asa have forgotten the source of his deliverance, and his Deliverer? And yet we do this every day when we do not rely fully on God. The end of Asa's life and reign was an especially tragic

footnote. Apparently by this time he did not trust God enough to seek His help, and instead relied on his physicians: *"In the thirty-ninth year of his reign Asa was afflicted with a disease in his feet. Though his disease was severe, even in his illness he did not seek help from the Lord, but only from the physicians. Then in the forty-first year of his reign Asa died and rested with his ancestors.*
They buried him in the tomb that he had cut out for himself in the City of David. They laid him on a bier covered with spices and various blended perfumes, and they made a huge fire in his honor." (2 Chron. 15:12-14)

John 14

God's timing is always so perfect….! Just last Tuesday my sister in love Lisa Ansley's sister Kirsten was killed in a tragic auto accident. She and her husband don't have the comfort that God can give at times like these, but my prayer is that somehow the words in John 14 could find their way to those grieving hearts. Jesus comforted His disciples, and assured them that what looked like tragedy was really God's ultimate triumph, and that he would be with them always, in a new way that they had not yet experienced- through His Spirit! *"Do not let your hearts be troubled. You believe in God; believe also in me. My Father's house has many rooms; if that were not so, would I have told you that I am going there to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am. You know the way to the place where I am going."* (John 14:1-4). And Jesus' disciples, like us, sometimes didn't grasp the magnitude and importance of what he taught them. We, like Thomas, try to understand but sometimes this great truth eludes us: *"Thomas said to him, "Lord, we don't know where you are going, so how can we know the way?" Jesus answered, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. If you really know me, you will know[b] my Father as well. From now on, you do know him and have seen him." Philip said, "Lord, show us the Father and that will be enough for us." Jesus answered: "Don't you know me, Philip, even after I have been among you such a long time? Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, 'Show us the Father'? Don't you believe that I am in the Father, and that the Father is in me? The words I say to you I do not speak on my own authority. Rather, it is the Father, living in me, who is doing his work. Believe me when I say that I am in the Father and the Father is in me; or at least believe on the evidence of the works themselves. Very truly I tell you, whoever believes in me will do the works I have been doing, and they will do even greater things than these, because I am going to the Father. And I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son. You may ask me for anything in my name, and I will do it."* (John 14:5-14). A great miracle lies in these parting words of Jesus- He said plainly that we who bear His Name will do "greater things" than He did- how can that possibly be true? How can we, mere persons and not divine. Accomplish more than Jesus. And yet as Jesus looked into the future He saw the changed lives and joyful works of the literally millions that were to follow Him! And they have all discovered the great power of "asking in His Name".

The Holy Spirit of God was coming…and soon: *"All this I have spoken while still with you. But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will*

teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you. Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid." (John 14:25-27). Jesus left them with real peace- not the absence of war of personal or emotional conflict but the very presence of God.

And this Spirit, in His disciples, would oversome the world- just as Jesus would overcome the evil one: *"You heard me say, 'I am going away and I am coming back to you.' If you loved me, you would be glad that I am going to the Father, for the Father is greater than I. I have told you now before it happens, so that when it does happen you will believe. I will not say much more to you, for the prince of this world is coming. He has no hold over me, but he comes so that the world may learn that I love the Father and do exactly what my Father has commanded me."* (John 14:28-31). The "prince of this world" (1 John 5:19) was overcome, and we have forever reaped the benefits of that great victory!

2 Chronicles 17-19 June 5, 2014 John 15

Jehosephat prospered and had peace during his reign. The reason was (and is) deceptively simple- he fully trusted God for everything. He was careful not only to follow the Law, but to share the Law with others and live according to its precepts (Psalm 119:1): *"The Lord was with Jehoshaphat because he followed the ways of his father David before him. He did not consult the Baals but sought the God of his father and followed his commands rather than the practices of Israel. The Lord established the kingdom under his control; and all Judah brought gifts to Jehoshaphat, so that he had great wealth and honor. His heart was devoted to the ways of the Lord; furthermore, he removed the high places and the Asherah poles from Judah."* (2 Chron 17:3-6). He sent officials and priests to the towns and villages, and they taught the people the Law. So great was this positive influence that even the Philistines- constant enemies of Israel- brought gifts of tribute: *"In the third year of his reign he sent his officials Ben-Hail, Obadiah, Zechariah, Nethanel and Micaiah to teach in the towns of Judah. With them were certain Levites—Shemaiah, Nethaniah, Zebadiah, Asahel, Shemiramoth, Jehonathan, Adonijah, Tobijah and Tob-Adonijah—and the priests Elishama and Jehoram. They taught throughout Judah, taking with them the Book of the Law of the Lord; they went around to all the towns of Judah and taught the people. The fear of the Lord fell on all the kingdoms of the lands surrounding Judah, so that they did not go to war against Jehoshaphat. Some Philistines brought Jehoshaphat gifts and silver as tribute, and the Arabs brought him flocks: seven thousand seven hundred rams and seven thousand seven hundred goats."* (2 Chron 17:7-11)

Jehosephat had one serious flaw in judgment, he allied himself with Ahab by marriage. This evil king of Israel and his wife Jezebel were prophesied against by Elisha (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ahab). Perhaps it was out of a desire for a more powerful alliance, or perhaps this joining with Ahab was merely a union of convenience, but it did not save Ahab from his death in battle- as prophesied by Elijah. Micaiah the prohet was the lone "seer" who provided Ahab with the truth about the outcome of the battle with Aram, for he said: *"Then Micaiah answered, "I saw all Israel scattered on the hills like sheep without a shepherd, and the Lord said,*

'These people have no master. Let each one go home in peace.'" (2 Chron. 18:16). Ahab was understandable disturbed by this prophesy, and ordered Micaiah confined after a heated argument: *"So now the Lord has put a deceiving spirit in the mouths of these prophets of yours. The Lord has decreed disaster for you." Then Zedekiah son of Kenaanah went up and slapped Micaiah in the face. "Which way did the spirit from[a] the Lord go when he went from me to speak to you?" he asked. Micaiah replied, "You will find out on the day you go to hide in an inner room." The king of Israel then ordered, "Take Micaiah and send him back to Amon the ruler of the city and to Joash the king's son, and say, 'This is what the king says: Put this fellow in prison and give him nothing but bread and water until I return safely.'" Micaiah declared, "If you ever return safely, the Lord has not spoken through me." Then he added, "Mark my words, all you people!"* (2 Chron. 18:22-27).
Micaiah's words- and those of Elijah- proved true, even though Ahad enetered the battle in disguise: *"So the king of Israel and Jehoshaphat king of Judah went up to Ramoth Gilead. 29 The king of Israel said to Jehoshaphat, "I will enter the battle in disguise, but you wear your royal robes." So the king of Israel disguised himself and went into battle. 30 Now the king of Aram had ordered his chariot commanders, "Do not fight with anyone, small or great, except the king of Israel." 31 When the chariot commanders saw Jehoshaphat, they thought, "This is the king of Israel." So they turned to attack him, but Jehoshaphat cried out, and the Lord helped him. God drew them away from him, 32 for when the chariot commanders saw that he was not the king of Israel, they stopped pursuing him. 33 But someone drew his bow at random and hit the king of Israel between the breastplate and the scale armor. The king told the chariot driver, "Wheel around and get me out of the fighting. I've been wounded." 34 All day long the battle raged, and the king of Israel propped himself up in his chariot facing the Arameans until evening. Then at sunset he died."* (2 Chron. 18:28-34).

God was clearly not pleased with Jehosephat's alliance with Ahab, and sent word of His dspleasure to Jehosephat through His prophet: *"When Jehoshaphat king of Judah returned safely to his palace in Jerusalem, Jehu the seer, the son of Hanani, went out to meet him and said to the king, "Should you help the wicked and love those who hate the Lord? Because of this, the wrath of the Lord is on you. There is, however, some good in you, for you have rid the land of the Asherah poles and have set your heart on seeking God."* (2 Chron. 19:1-4). Jehosephat had many redeeming qualities, including his devotion to God, and God was apparently willing to overlook or forgive Jehosephat for this intransigence.

Jehosephat wisely selected judges to help him more efficiently rule the people. These judges had a similar function to those in the Book of Judges, describing a time in Israel's history that predated the kings in Israel (http://www.dawnbible.com/2012/1207ib29.htm). The important principle that Jehosephat emphasized with these judges was that they were judging not for men but for the Lord (2 Chron. 19:5). Jehosephat also appointed the Levites to the task of judging the people, especially where spiritual matters and adherence to the Law was in question: *"In Jerusalem also, Jehoshaphat appointed some of the Levites, priests and heads of Israelite families to administer the law of the Lord and to settle disputes. And they lived in Jerusalem. He gave them these orders: "You must serve faithfully and wholeheartedly in the fear of the Lord. In every case that comes*

before you from your people who live in the cities—whether bloodshed or other concerns of the law, commands, decrees or regulations—you are to warn them not to sin against the Lord; otherwise his wrath will come on you and your people. Do this, and you will not sin." (2 Chron. 19:8-10).

John 15

I am the true vine- one of the seven "I am" statements in John's gospel (http://gracethrufaith.com/topical-studies/spiritual-life/the-seven-i-am-statements-in-john/). What does this mean to you and me, and what did this mean to Jesus' disciples and othe followers? The teachings of Jesus were always expressed in the perfect concise language and symbolism that most hearers could understand. We (and they) will probably never plumb the depths of these sayings, but there is much to be learned as we attempt to put these Words into our hearts and lives. A vine was the source of nutrition, water and life to the branches. It was an ever present connection of the branches to the Earth. And so Jesus is our Source, our Sustainer, and our Connection with all that we need for abundant life! Jesus said: *"I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful. You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you. Remain in me, as I also remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me."* (John 15:1-4). Not only are we sustained by Jesus, but are cleansed by Him also (verse 3). And we will be "pruned" (not killed!) when we are not productive (verse 2).

And then Jesus testifies as to the great love that he and the father have for us: *"As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love. If you keep my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commands and remain in his love. I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete. My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends. You are my friends if you do what I command. I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master's business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you. You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you so that you might go and bear fruit—fruit that will last—and so that whatever you ask in my name the Father will give you. This is my command: Love each other."* (John 15:9-17) Whole books have been written on this "love" (agape) that Jesus and the Father have for us, I can only outline a few observations.

First, loving and keeping commandments are eternally intertwined. When we love- truly love- following the commandments is a logical and spiritual outcome. Second, our joy is unique- and can only come from the father's love for us. Joy is the God give ability to rejoice in the midst of suffering or in plenty, and is not dependent on our circumstance but only in the reality of our relationship with God. Thirdly, Jesus calls us His "friends" – we are in a special, loving and intimate relationship with Him based on trust. Fourthly, he chose us- often when we didn't know Him or care about Him, much less care about "finding" Him. Lastly, we are to love each other as a reflection of and response to the love He has shown to us. That's how they "know

we are Christians"- by our love. What a great witness that love is to the amazing love we receive from God, who is "rich in mercy" (Ephesians 2:4).

Another truth we see in this chapter of John's gospel, and a "hard truth" is that the world will hate us. There are several reasons for this: 1) the world wants to be "in charge" and wants to set itself- not God- on the throne; 2) the world distrusts us because we are so transparent in our love- and it may shame them because we "live in the light" (1 John 1:7); 3) those in sin prefer to live in darkness (Matthew 4:16; John 3:19). And we have been warned-God told us in His Word that we would be hated (Psalm 35:19; 69:4): *"If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first. If you belonged to the world, it would love you as its own. As it is, you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world. That is why the world hates you. Remember what I told you: 'A servant is not greater than his master.' If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also. If they obeyed my teaching, they will obey yours also. They will treat you this way because of my name, for they do not know the one who sent me. If I had not come and spoken to them, they would not be guilty of sin; but now they have no excuse for their sin. Whoever hates me hates my Father as well. If I had not done among them the works no one else did, they would not be guilty of sin. As it is, they have seen, and yet they have hated both me and my Father. But this is to fulfill what is written in their Law: 'They hated me without reason.'"* (John 15:18-25)

But there is hope- the Advocate- the Holy Spirit is coming to comfort us and lead us into all truth:_*"When the Advocate comes, whom I will send to you from the Father—the Spirit of truthwho goes out from the Father—he will testify about me. And you also must testify, for you have been with me from the beginning."* (John 15:26-27)

2 Chronicles 20-22 June 6, 2014 John 16:1-15

What battles are we called on to fight? Are we armed and ready and "prayed up"? Jehosephat discovered that when the battle is "the Lord's". Jehosephat saw the approaching threat of the armies of Ammon and Moab and knew that in earthly terms, he was outmatched. His response was to gather the prople, to declare a fast, pray and praise the Lord! Then the spirit came on Jehaziel, and he declared that God would give them a great victory: *"Then the Spirit of the Lord came on Jahaziel son of Zechariah, the son of Benaiah, the son of Jeiel, the son of Mattaniah, a Levite and descendant of Asaph, as he stood in the assembly. 15 He said: "Listen, King Jehoshaphat and all who live in Judah and Jerusalem! This is what the Lord says to you: 'Do not be afraid or discouraged because of this vast army. For the battle is not yours, but God's."* (2 Chron. 20:15-15). And just as God had done with Gideon, he confused the enemies of Israel and they fought against one another – destroying themselves. Isreal did not even have to face battle. God completely took over, and showed His mighty hand in battle: *"As they began to sing and praise, the Lord set ambushes against the men of Ammon and Moab and Mount Seir who were invading Judah, and they were defeated. The Ammonites and Moabites rose up against the men from Mount Seir to destroy and annihilate them. After they finished slaughtering the men from Seir, they helped to destroy one another. When the men of Judah came to the place that overlooks the desert and looked toward the vast army, they saw only dead bodies lying on the ground; no one had escaped. So Jehoshaphat and his men went to carry off their plunder, and they found among*

them a great amount of equipment and clothing and also articles of value—more than they could take away. There was so much plunder that it took three days to collect it. On the fourth day they assembled in the Valley of Berakah, where they praised the Lord. This is why it is called the Valley of Berakah to this day. Then, led by Jehoshaphat, all the men of Judah and Jerusalem returned joyfully to Jerusalem, for the Lord had given them cause to rejoice over their enemies. They entered Jerusalem and went to the temple of the Lord with harps and lyres and trumpets." (2 Chron 20:22-28) They key was total dependence on God, and praising Him even before He acted on their behalf!

God impressed His own people with His power and might, and also made a deep impression on the people living around Israel*:"The fear of God came on all the surrounding kingdoms when they heard how the LORD had fought against the enemies of Israel. And the kingdom of Jehoshaphat was at peace, for his God had given him rest on every side."* (2 Chron. 20:29-30). And as we sometimes do, Jehosephat strayed from his strict adherence to God's law and direction, and allied himself with Ahaziah, the evil king of Israel, to make ships. His efforts were obliterated, as a clear sign of God's displeasure: *"Later, Jehoshaphat king of Judah made an alliance with Ahaziah king of Israel, whose ways were wicked. He agreed with him to construct a fleet of trading ships. After these were built at Ezion Geber, Eliezer son of Dodavahu of Mareshah prophesied against Jehoshaphat, saying, "Because you have made an alliance with Ahaziah, the Lord will destroy what you have made." The ships were wrecked and were not able to set sail to trade."* (2 Chron. 20:35-37)

Then Jehosephat left the earth, and selected Jehoram, his first born son, to take over the crown (2 Chron. 21:1-3). Just as Jehosephat had done good and sought the Lord's favor, Jehoram was almost the exact opposite, His first act as king was very telling- he killed his brothers and some officials- presumably those loyal to Jehosephat and to the Lord: *"When Jehoram established himself firmly over his father's kingdom, he put all his brothers to the sword along with some of the officials of Israel. Jehoram was thirty-two years old when he became king, and he reigned in Jerusalem eight years. He followed the ways of the kings of Israel, as the house of Ahab had done, for he married a daughter of Ahab. He did evil in the eyes of the Lord. Nevertheless, because of the covenant the Lord had made with David, the Lord was not willing to destroy the house of David. He had promised to maintain a lamp for him and his descendants forever."* (2 Chron 21:4-7). Notice that God in His mercy spared the nation from destruction- but he was not to spare Jehoram! This evil king was "called out" by Elijah, who wrote him a scathing letter, and God allowed the enemies of Jehoram to attack Judah and overwhelm Judah, killing all of Jehoram's family except his youngest son Ahaziah. And God also sent a painful disease to Jehoram, and he died from it in great pain: *"Jehoram received a letter from Elijah the prophet, which said: "This is what the Lord, the God of your father David, says: 'You have not followed the ways of your father Jehoshaphat or of Asa king of Judah. But you have followed the ways of the kings of Israel, and you have led Judah and the people of Jerusalem to prostitute themselves, just as the house of Ahab did. You have also murdered your own brothers, members of your own family, men who were better than you. So now the Lord is about to strike your people, your sons, your wives and everything that is yours, with a heavy blow. You yourself will be very ill with a lingering disease of the bowels, until the disease causes your*

bowels to come out.'" The Lord aroused against Jehoram the hostility of the Philistines and of the Arabs who lived near the Cushites. They attacked Judah, invaded it and carried off all the goods found in the king's palace, together with his sons and wives. Not a son was left to him except Ahaziah, the youngest. After all this, the Lord afflicted Jehoram with an incurable disease of the bowels. In the course of time, at the end of the second year, his bowels came out because of the disease, and he died in great pain. His people made no funeral fire in his honor, as they had for his predecessors. Jehoram was thirty-two years old when he became king, and he reigned in Jerusalem eight years. He passed away, to no one's regret, and was buried in the City of David, but not in the tombs of the kings. (2 Chron.21:12-20). What an epitaph- "He passed away, to no one's regret"! Eight years of rebellion and misery both for Jehoram and the people- what a waste.

Ahaziah was king "by default"- there were no other sons of Jehoram living. Ahaziah did no better at following God thatn his father. In a story full of intrigue and murder, he was eliminated by Jehu, the man God had appointed to remove this evil king: Through Ahaziah's visit to Joram, God brought about Ahaziah's downfall. When Ahaziah arrived, he went out with Joram to meet Jehu son of Nimshi, whom the Lord had anointed to destroy the house of Ahab. 8 While Jehu was executing judgment on the house of Ahab, he found the officials of Judah and the sons of Ahaziah's relatives, who had been attending Ahaziah, and he killed them. 9 He then went in search of Ahaziah, and his men captured him while he was hiding in Samaria. He was brought to Jehu and put to death. They buried him, for they said, "He was a son of Jehoshaphat, who sought the Lord with all his heart." So there was no one in the house of Ahaziah powerful enough to retain the kingdom." (2 Chron. 22:7-9). Notice that there was now a "power vacuum", which was quickly filled by Athalia, Ahaziah's mother*: "When Athaliah the mother of Ahaziah saw that her son was dead, she proceeded to destroy the whole royal family of the house of Judah. But Jehosheba, the daughter of King Jehoram, took Joash son of Ahaziah and stole him away from among the royal princes who were about to be murdered and put him and his nurse in a bedroom. Because Jehosheba, the daughter of King Jehoram and wife of the priest Jehoiada, was Ahaziah's sister, she hid the child from Athaliah so she could not kill him. He remained hidden with them at the temple of God for six years while Athaliah ruled the land."*
(2 Chron 22:10-12) God had decided that Joash was to be the next king, so he inspired Jehosheba to hide him away from the murderous Athalia. Men rule, and God overrules! And who ever said the Bible was not a realistic picture of the machinations and evil of mankind. Fortunately there are a few "good characters" sprinkled through the portrait!

John 16:1-15

Jesus was about to leave His disciples, but he would not leave them "helpless and hopeless". They were certainly to experience great grief, sorrow and confusion as the crucifixion of their Master and Friend took place. Some would start their lives over, so they thought, by returning to the lives and occupations they had pursued before. Jesus, however, promised them that the very Spirit of God would be with them and empower them to do "greater things" (John 14:12). Jesus explained it this

way: *"But very truly I tell you, it is for your good that I am going away. Unless I go away, the Advocate will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you. When he comes, he will prove the world to be in the wrong about sin and righteousness and judgment: about sin, because people do not believe in me; about righteousness, because I am going to the Father, where you can see me no longer; and about judgment, because the prince of this world now stands condemned. "I have much more to say to you, more than you can now bear. But when he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all the truth. He will not speak on his own; he will speak only what he hears, and he will tell you what is yet to come. He will glorify me because it is from me that he will receive what he will make known to you. All that belongs to the Father is mine. That is why I said the Spirit will receive from me what he will make known to you."* (John 16:7-15). This Spirit would give them power that they had never dreamed of or experienced, and it would be greatly needed, for Jesus' friends, followers and disciples would be rejected and persecuted by an unbelieving word: *"All this I have told you so that you will not fall away. They will put you out of the synagogue; in fact, the time is coming when anyone who kills you will think they are offering a service to God. They will do such things because they have not known the Father or me. I have told you this, so that when their time comes you will remember that I warned you about them. I did not tell you this from the beginning because I was with you, but now I am going to him who sent me. None of you asks me, 'Where are you going?' Rather, you are filled with grief because I have said these things."* (John 16:1-6).

This was God's plan- the plan that Jesus accomplished perfectly. He trusted us- imperfect, doubting, not fully trusting God, not able to see God's vision for our future of the future of His people- to carry out His plan. My father once shared a story that is pertinent to this, and I present it as follows:
"There is an old legend which says when Jesus had ascended into heaven, the angel Gabriel asked him, "Lord what plans have you made for carrying on your ministry in the world? How will people learn of what you have done for them?" Jesus responded, "I left that to Peter, James and John, Martha and Mary. They are to tell their friends and their friends will tell other friends until the whole world has heard the good news." Gabriel then asked, "What if Peter is so busy with his nets and Martha so full of her housework and the friends so preoccupied that they all forget to tell their friends? Don't you think you should make a "Plan B"?" Jesus answered, "I have no Plan B. I am counting on My Children to spread my name and my love."
(http://www.sermoncentral.com/sermons/jesus-has-no-plan-b-martin-dale-sermon-on-growth-in-christ-78625.asp)

There is NO plan B- we are the plan!

2 Chronicles 23-25 June 7, 2014 John 16:16-33

The priest Jehoida was the leader in the effort to kkep the child (who was to be king) joash from the murderous intentions of Athalia (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jehoiada). He organized the priests and gave them orders that no on e was to enter the Temple, where Joash had been hidden for his safety (2 Chron. 23:1-10). The the time came to crown the boy-king, and this coronation was done in public, perhaps to draw the attention and to draw out

Athalia.The sself-declared Queen Athalia was predictable upset and threatened by this coronation, and she tried to undo it: *“Jehoiada and his sons brought out the king’s son and put the crown on him; they presented him with a copy of the covenant and proclaimed him king. They anointed him and shouted, “Long live the king!” When Athaliah heard the noise of the people running and cheering the king, she went to them at the temple of the Lord. She looked, and there was the king, standing by his pillar at the entrance. The officers and the trumpeters were beside the king, and all the people of the land were rejoicing and blowing trumpets, and musicians with their instruments were leading the praises. Then Athaliah tore her robes and shouted, “Treason! Treason!”* (2 Chron. 23:11-13).

In a short while, Jehoida sent armed troops to capture and kill her (though not in the Temple), and started the re-sestablishment of the covenant keeping between the people and their God (2 Chron. 23:14-17): Jehoiada the priest sent out the commanders of units of a hundred, who were in charge of the troops, and said to them: *“Bring her out between the ranks and put to the sword anyone who follows her.” For the priest had said, “Do not put her to death at the temple of the LORD.” So they seized her as she reached the entrance of the Horse Gate on the palace grounds, and there they put her to death. Jehoiada then made a covenant that he, the people and the king would be the LORD’s people. All the people went to the temple of Baal and tore it down. They smashed the altars and idols and killed Mattan the priest of Baal in front of the altars.”* Once again, God’s people had the opportunity to be His people, and to worship Him alone.

Joash’s reign started well, one of his first tasks was to rebuild the Temple. He decided to exact a tax from the people, and organized skilled craftsmen and laborers to accomplish this task: *“Some time later Joash decided to restore the temple of the Lord. He called together the priests and Levites and said to them, “Go to the towns of Judah and collect the money due annually from all Israel, to repair the temple of your God. Do it now.” But the Levites did not act at once. Therefore the king summoned Jehoiada the chief priest and said to him, “Why haven’t you required the Levites to bring in from Judah and Jerusalem the tax imposed by Moses the servant of the Lord and by the assembly of Israel for the tent of the covenant law?”*
Now the sons of that wicked woman Athaliah had broken into the temple of God and had used even its sacred objects for the Baals. At the king’s command, a chest was made and placed outside, at the gate of the temple of the Lord. A proclamation was then issued in Judah and Jerusalem that they should bring to the Lord the tax that Moses the servant of God had required of Israel in the wilderness. All the officials and all the people brought their contributions gladly, dropping them into the chest until it was full. Whenever the chest was brought in by the Levites to the king’s officials and they saw that there was a large amount of money, the royal secretary and the officer of the chief priest would come and empty the chest and carry it back to its place. They did this regularly and collected a great amount of money. The king and Jehoiada gave it to those who carried out the work required for the temple of the Lord. They hired masons and carpenters to restore the Lord’s temple, and also workers in iron and bronze to repair the temple.” (2 Chron. 24:4-12). Things were good as long as Jehoida was alive, and he lived a long and productive life (2 Chron. 24:13-16).

A radical change occurred on Jehoida's death. His influence while he was alive was enough to keep Judah and her king on a righteous path, but soon after Jehoida's death Joash started to wander from righteousness (2 Chron. 25:17-19): *"After the death of Jehoiada, the officials of Judah came and paid homage to the king, and he listened to them. They abandoned the temple of the Lord, the God of their ancestors, and worshiped Asherah poles and idols. Because of their guilt, God's anger came on Judah and Jerusalem. 19 Although the Lord sent prophets to the people to bring them back to him, and though they testified against them, they would not listen."*

It would take Zechariah, son of Jehoida, to try to straighten out the evil ways that Joash had adopted*: "Then the Spirit of God came on Zechariah son of Jehoiada the priest. He stood before the people and said, "This is what God says: 'Why do you disobey the LORD's commands? You will not prosper. Because you have forsaken the LORD, he has forsaken you.'" But they plotted against him, and by order of the king they stoned him to death in the courtyard of the LORD's temple. King Joash did not remember the kindness Zechariah's father Jehoiada had shown him but killed his son, who said as he lay dying, "May the LORD see this and call you to account."* (2 Chron. 24:20-22). And Joash pais a terrible price for his evil ways- he was invaded and overrun by the Arameans, and was murdered in his bed. He was not buried in a place of honor, as had the "good kings": *"At the turn of the year the army of Aram marched against Joash; it invaded Judah and Jerusalem and killed all the leaders of the people. They sent all the plunder to their king in Damascus. Although the Aramean army had come with only a few men, the Lord delivered into their hands a much larger army. Because Judah had forsaken the Lord, the God of their ancestors, judgment was executed on Joash. When the Arameans withdrew, they left Joash severely wounded. His officials conspired against him for murdering the son of Jehoiada the priest, and they killed him in his bed. So he died and was buried in the City of David, but not in the tombs of the kings. Those who conspired against him were Zabad son of Shimeath an Ammonite woman, and Jehozabad, son of Shimrith a Moabite woman. The account of his sons, the many prophecies about him, and the record of the restoration of the temple of God are written in the annotations on the book of the kings. And Amaziah his son succeeded him as king."* (2 Chron 24:22-27) This Zechariah is sometimes confused with another Zechariah, who lived 300 years later (https://answersingenesis.org/jesus-christ/is-jesus-god/contradictions-was-jesus-wrong-about-zechariahs-father/)

Amaziah now reigned in Judah. He was a "good" king and followed God's ways, but "not wholeheartedly". This brings us to the thorny problem of incomplete obedience. In the view of many conservative scholars, partial obedience has the same result and is in the same catgory as disobedience. However, most of us who are truly honest with ourselves will confess that we are only partially obedient to God. There are times when we are doenright disobedient! The Scripture makes it clear here, and in many other places, that this "partial" obedience does not honor God. And so it is here with Amaziah, who assumed control of Judah at age 25*: "Amaziah was twenty-five years old when he became king, and he reigned in Jerusalem twenty-nine years. His mother's name was Jehoaddan; she was from*

Jerusalem. He did what was right in the eyes of the Lord, but not wholeheartedly. After the kingdom was firmly in his control, he executed the officials who had murdered his father the king. Yet he did not put their children to death, but acted in accordance with what is written in the Law, in the Book of Moses, where the Lord commanded: "Parents shall not be put to death for their children, nor children be put to death for their parents; each will die for their own sin." (2 Chron 25:1-4)

The story of Amaziah includes the first use of mercenaries to recapture Edom, and the tragic assasination of Amaziah who died in the same fashion as his father. Wikipedia's account is as follows: "As soon as his kingdom was established Amaziah slew the murderers of his father, but contrary to custom permitted their children to live. He was the first to employ a mercenary army of 100,000 Israelite soldiers, which he did in his attempt to reconquer Edom, which had rebelled during the reign of Jehoram, his great-grandfather. He was commanded by an unnamed prophet to send back the mercenaries, to whom he acquiesced (2 Chr. 25:7-10, 13), much to the annoyance of the mercenaries. His obedience to this command was followed by a decisive victory over the Edomites (2 Chr. 25:14-16). Amaziah began to worship some of the idols he took from the Edomites. His victory over Edom inflated his pride, and he challenged to a combat Jehoash, grandson of Jehu, king of Israel. The latter's disdain and scorn for Amaziah are embodied in the stinging parable of the thistle and the cedar (2 Kings 14:9). In his resentment, Amaziah rushed into a disastrous battle at Beth-shemesh, and a humiliating defeat overtook his army and the land. The king was captured, 400 cubits of the wall of Jerusalem broken down, the city, Temple, and palace were looted, and hostages carried to Samaria. His defeat was followed by a conspiracy that took his life. He, like his father, was the victim of assassins, apparently bent upon putting out of the way one who had brought upon the land such dire disasters. Amaziah was slain at Lachish, to which he had fled, and his body was brought to Jerusalem, where it was buried in the royal sepulchre (2 Kings 14:19, 20; 2 Chr. 25:27, 28)."
(http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Amaziah_of_Judah)

John 16:16-33

Grief turns to joy- loss to "real" gain, and disaster to triumph. As I have metioned earlier, one of the most influential sermons I have ever heard was from Pastor S. M. Lockridge- "It's Friday, but Sunday's Coming":

It's Friday. Jesus is arrested in the garden where He was praying. But Sunday's coming.

It's Friday. The disciples are hiding and Peter's denying that he knows the Lord. But Sunday's coming.

It's Friday. Jesus is standing before the high priest of Israel, silent as a lamb before the slaughter. But Sunday's coming.

It's Friday. Jesus is beaten, mocked, and spit upon. But Sunday's coming.

It's Friday. Those Roman soldiers are flogging our Lord with a leather scourge that has bits of bones and glass and metal, tearing at his flesh. But Sunday's coming.

It's Friday. The Son of man stands firm as they press the crown of thorns down into his brow. But Sunday's coming.

It's Friday. See Him walking to Calvary, the blood dripping from His body. See the cross crashing down on His back as He stumbles beneath the load. It's Friday; but Sunday's a coming.

It's Friday. See those Roman soldiers driving the nails into the feet and hands of my Lord. Hear my Jesus cry, "Father, forgive them." It's Friday; but Sunday's coming.

It's Friday. Jesus is hanging on the cross, bloody and dying. But Sunday's coming.

It's Friday. The sky grows dark, the earth begins to tremble, and He who knew no sin became sin for us. Holy God who will not abide with sin pours out His wrath on that perfect sacrificial lamb who cries out, "My God, My God. Why hast thou forsaken me?" What a horrible cry. But Sunday's coming.

It's Friday. And at the moment of Jesus' death, the veil of the Temple that separates sinful man from Holy God was torn from the top to the bottom because Sunday's coming.

It's Friday. Jesus is hanging on the cross, heaven is weeping and hell is partying. But that's because it's Friday, and they don't know it, but Sunday's a coming.

And on that horrible day 2000 years ago, Jesus the Christ, the Lord of glory, the only begotten Son of God, the only perfect man died on the cross of Calvary. Satan thought that he had won the victory. Surely he had destroyed the Son of God. Finally he had disproved the prophecy God had uttered in the Garden and the one who was to crush his head had been destroyed. But that was Friday.

Now it's Sunday. And just about dawn on that first day of the week, there was a great earthquake. But that wasn't the only thing that was shaking because now it's Sunday. And the angel of the Lord is coming down out of heaven and rolling the

stone away from the door of the tomb. Yes, it's Sunday, and the angel of the Lord is sitting on that stone and the guards posted at the tomb to keep the body from disappearing were shaking in their boots because it's Sunday, and the lamb that was silent before the slaughter is now the resurrected lion from the tribe of Judah, for He is not here, the angel says. He is risen indeed.

It's Sunday, and the crucified and resurrected Christ has defeated death, hell, sin and the grave. It's Sunday. And now everything has changed. It's the age of grace, God's grace poured out on all who would look to that crucified lamb of Calvary. Grace freely given to all who would believe that Jesus Christ died on the cross of Calvary was buried and rose again. All because it's Sunday.

Jesus comforted His followers, and told them: *"In a little while you will see me no more, and then after a little while you will see me." At this, some of his disciples said to one another, "What does he mean by saying, 'In a little while you will see me no more, and then after a little while you will see me,' and 'Because I am going to the Father'?" They kept asking, "What does he mean by 'a little while'? We don't understand what he is saying." Jesus saw that they wanted to ask him about this, so he said to them, "Are you asking one another what I meant when I said, 'In a little while you will see me no more, and then after a little while you will see me'? Very truly I tell you, you will weep and mourn while the world rejoices. You will grieve, but your grief will turn to joy. A woman giving birth to a child has pain because her time has come; but when her baby is born she forgets the anguish because of her joy that a child is born into the world. So with you: Now is your time of grief, but I will see you again and you will rejoice, and no one will take away your joy. In that day you will no longer ask me anything. Very truly I tell you, my Father will give you whatever you ask in my name. Until now you have not asked for anything in my name. Ask and you will receive, and your joy will be complete." (John 16:16b-24). And the triumphal victory over sin and death would be shared with His followers: "I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world."* (John 16:33)

2 Chronicles 26-28 June 8, 2014 John 17

Uzziah was a "good young king", somewhat in the mold of Josiah and Joash. He had a promising beginning to his reign, and followed God: *"He did what was right in the eyes of the Lord, just as his father Amaziah had done. He sought God during the days of Zechariah, who instructed him in the fear of God. As long as he sought the Lord, God gave him success."* (2 Chron. 26:4-5). He had success in battle with the Philistines and Ammonites, partly due to the efficiency and organization of his army: *He went to war against the Philistines and broke down the walls of Gath, Jabneh and Ashdod. He then rebuilt towns near Ashdod and elsewhere among the Philistines. God helped him against the Philistines and against the Arabs who lived in Gur Baal and against the Meunites. The Ammonites brought tribute to Uzziah, and his fame spread as far as the border of Egypt, because he had become very*

powerful. (2 Chron. 26:6-8 and 11-15) As unfortunately happens when one becomes successful and powerful, the temptation is to become too sure of oneself and cease any allegiance, reverence, and dependence on God. The Scripture reports that Uzziah became "powerful" and that his pride led to his downfall. Just as Saul had tried to assume the duties of priest in the absence of Samuel, Uzziah decided in his pride and self-satisfaction that he would become "like a priest" and burn incense in the temple. This greatly displeased God: *"But after Uzziah became powerful, his pride led to his downfall. He was unfaithful to the Lord his God, and entered the temple of the Lord to burn incense on the altar of incense. Azariah the priest with eighty other courageous priests of the Lord followed him in. They confronted King Uzziah and said, "It is not right for you, Uzziah, to burn incense to the Lord. That is for the priests, the descendants of Aaron, who have been consecrated to burn incense. Leave the sanctuary, for you have been unfaithful; and you will not be honored by the Lord God."* (2 Chron. 26:16-18).

Pride led to irreverent behavior, and when confronted with this irreverence, Uzziah became angry and "raged" at the priests. And here is where a real and ugly consequence is immediately attached- Uzziah broke out in leprosy: *"Uzziah, who had a censer in his hand ready to burn incense, became angry. While he was raging at the priests in their presence before the incense altar in the Lord's temple, leprosy broke out on his forehead. When Azariah the chief priest and all the other priests looked at him, they saw that he had leprosy on his forehead, so they hurried him out. Indeed, he himself was eager to leave, because the Lord had afflicted him. King Uzziah had leprosy until the day he died. He lived in a separate house—leprous, and banned from the temple of the Lord. Jotham his son had charge of the palace and governed the people of the land."* (2 Chron 26:19-21)

Some readers, certainly those reading in the 21st century, may struggle with the "punishment" given by God for this sin of pride. Matthew Henry's commentary seems to tacitly assume that God is within His rights and perfectly fair in meting out leprosy as a punishment for this sin (http://www.christnotes.org/commentary.php?com=mhc&b=14&c=26). Some modern readers wonder how a gracious, loving and forgiving God can be reconciled with a righteous, just, awesome and jealous God. We struggle fundamentally with the issue of God's anger. We quite such platitudes such as "God hates the sin, not the sinner", but in this case the punishment is felt intensely and for the duration of the life of the sinner themselves. The commentary by Jamieson Fausset Brown has a similar treatment of the close correlation- and just result- of the punishment here on the sin committed: *"This daring and wicked act is in both records traced to the intoxicating influence of overweening pride and vanity. But here the additional circumstances are stated, that his entrance was opposed, and strong remonstrances made (1Ch 6:10) by the high priest, who was accompanied by eighty inferior priests. Rage and threats were the only answers he deigned to return, but God took care to vindicate the sacredness of the priestly office. At the moment the king lifted the censer, He struck him with leprosy. The earthquake mentioned (Am 1:1) is said to have been felt at the moment [Josephus]."* (http://bibleapps.com/jfb/2_chronicles/26.htm)

Similar concerns and issues arise in God's seemingly cavalier treatment of Job. Why would God "on a wager" (Job 1:12ff) allow Satan to influct loss and pain on Job, a

“righteous man”? I have struggled with these issues, and even at times been angry with God over them. The result of all this though is that I have resigned myself to the mystery, the “unknowable” about God. I know from long experience He loves me and is always with me, and that is the conclusion I not only arrive at but can live with- even rejoice in.

Jotham’s reign in Judah is decribed in some detail in 2 Chronicles 27. Unlike Uzziah, Jotham did not attempt to enter the Temple’s most holy areas and try to assume the role of priest: *“He did what was right in the eyes of the Lord, just as his father Uzziah had done, but unlike him he did not enter the temple of the Lord. The people, however, continued their corrupt practices.”* (2 Chron. 27:2). He was, however, not enough of an example or did not relentlessly pursue and correct the unrighteous practice of the people to the point that they “changed their ways”. His avoidance of the sin of his father was very likely the result of seeing the horrible punishment of leprosy, and administering many of the responsibilities of the office of king for his leprous father for so many years. This was certainly a vivid and life changing experience for the son! The Scripture here presents the “formula” we are to see over and over- righteous living leds to rewards, success in battle against God’s enemies, and power: *“Jotham waged war against the king of the Ammonites and conquered them. That year the Ammonites paid him a hundred talents of silver, ten thousand cors of wheat and ten thousand cors of barley. The Ammonites brought him the same amount also in the second and third years. Jotham grew powerful because he walked steadfastly before the Lord his God.”* (2 Chron. 27:5-6)

Another example of an “evil” king in Judah is given in the story of Ahaz in 2 Chronicles 28:
“Ahaz was twenty years old when he became king, and he reigned in Jerusalem sixteen years. Unlike David his father, he did not do what was right in the eyes of the Lord. He followed the ways of the kings of Israel and also made idols for worshiping the Baals. He burned sacrifices in the Valley of Ben Hinnom and sacrificed his children in the fire, engaging in the detestable practices of the nations the Lord had driven out before the Israelites. He offered sacrifices and burned incense at the high places, on the hilltops and under every spreading tree. Therefore the Lord his God delivered him into the hands of the king of Aram. The Arameans defeated him and took many of his people as prisoners and brought them to Damascus.” (2 Chron. 28:1-5) So again the formula is- obey God, follow His ways and prosper. There is little room for partial of half hearted obedience. And Ahaz, instead of learning from his well-deserved misfortune and changing his ways- showing true repentance, did the opposite and made things even worse:
“In his time of trouble King Ahaz became even more unfaithful to the Lord. He offered sacrifices to the gods of Damascus, who had defeated him; for he thought, “Since the gods of the kings of Aram have helped them, I will sacrifice to them so they will help me.” But they were his downfall and the downfall of all Israel. Ahaz gathered together the furnishings from the temple of God and cut them in pieces. He shut the doors of the Lord’s temple and set up altars at every street corner in Jerusalem. In every town in Judah he built high places to burn sacrifices to other gods and aroused the anger of the Lord, the God of his ancestors.” (2 Chron. 28:22-25)

John 17

Prayer- heartfelt and earnest- for ourselves, in intercession for others- in praise and thanks to God- these are the "bread and butter" of the believer who trusts and loves God. Jesus modeled this prayer for us in John 17. His prayer was 1) for glorification of Himself and in doing so, to His Father (John 17:1-5); 2) for the disciples (John 17:6-19); and lastly 3) for all believers (John 17:20-26).

For glorification- Jesus asks God to glorify Himself not to set Himself up in competition with His Father, but to draw beleivers into eternal life. When the seeker finds God's glory in Jesus, it points him to the Source and to salvation. So Jesus earnestly prays:*"...glorify me in your presence with the glory I had with you before the world began."* (John 17:5b).

For the disciples- Jesus shows His gratitude that these have been given to Him, for instruction, training and ultimately empowering with the Spirit. Jesus prays that they be sanctified- set aside_ in a special way for the work they are to accomplish through the Sprit- the building of the Kingdom: *"As you sent me into the world, I have sent them into the world. For them I sanctify myself, that they too may be truly sanctified."* (John 17:18-19)

For all believers- Jesus prays not only for those who believed in His time, but all that were to follow in His footsteps and carry out His work in the world. His prayer is that all of us who believe would have unity, glory and love: *"I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one— I in them and you in me— so that they may be brought to complete unity. Then the world will know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me."* (John 17:22-23). And Jesus also prays that we will know Him and that the worls would know the Father through them: *"Righteous Father, though the world does not know you, I know you, and they know that you have sent me. I have made you known to them, and will continue to make you known in order that the love you have for me may be in them and that I myself may be in them."* (John 17:25-26)

2 Chronicles 29-31 June 9, 2014 John 18:1-23

Hezekiah is widely regarded as one of the key figures in the history oif Israel, mostly because of the sweeping reforms that he initiated. Under his leadership, the true religion and practices of the covenant people of Israel were re-established. (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hezekiah). The entry in Wikipedai states: *"Hezekiah was, according to the Hebrew Bible, the son of Ahaz and the 13th king of Judah. Archaeologist Edwin Thiele has concluded that his reign was between c. 715 and 686 BC. He is also one of the most prominent kings of Judah mentioned in the Hebrew Bible and is one of the kings mentioned in the genealogy of Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew."*

According to the Hebrew Bible, Hezekiah witnessed the destruction of the northern Kingdom of Israel by Sargon's Assyrians in c. 720 BC and was king of Judah during the invasion and siege of Jerusalem by Sennacherib in 701 BC. Hezekiah enacted sweeping religious reforms, during which he removed the worship of foreign deities

from the Temple in Jerusalem, and restored the worship of Yahweh, God of Israel, in accordance with the Torah. Isaiah and Micah prophesied during his reign.
The Scriptures put it this way: *"Hezekiah was twenty-five years old when he became king, and he reigned in Jerusalem twenty-nine years. His mother's name was Abijah daughter of Zechariah. He did what was right in the eyes of the Lord, just as his father David had done. In the first month of the first year of his reign, he opened the doors of the temple of the Lord and repaired them. He brought in the priests and the Levites, assembled them in the square on the east side and said: "Listen to me, Levites! Consecrate yourselves now and consecrate the temple of the Lord, the God of your ancestors. Remove all defilement from the sanctuary. Our parents were unfaithful; they did evil in the eyes of the Lord our God and forsook him. They turned their faces away from the Lord's dwelling place and turned their backs on him. They also shut the doors of the portico and put out the lamps. They did not burn incense or present any burnt offerings at the sanctuary to the God of Israel. Therefore, the anger of the Lord has fallen on Judah and Jerusalem; he has made them an object of dread and horror and scorn, as you can see with your own eyes. This is why our fathers have fallen by the sword and why our sons and daughters and our wives are in captivity. Now I intend to make a covenant with the Lord, the God of Israel, so that his fierce anger will turn away from us."* (2 Chron 29:1-10)

Hezekiah correctly concluded that the horrors that Israel had experienced were directly related to their evil ways and lack of trust and faith in God. His intention was to re-establish the covenant between God abd Israel. It is significant that he saw the "repair" of the covenant as the responsibility of Israel- God had never (and would never) break His part of the covenant relationship. In order to accomplish this restoration, Hezekiah was deliberate and careful to accomplish reform in the areas of: 1) the assgnments to the Levites (2 Chron. 2912-19); 2) the re-establishment of sacrifices (2 Chron. 29:20-27); and 3) the re-establishment of the Passover observance (2 Chron. 30:1-27).

He also was careful to destroy all that remained of the pagan practices of the people: *"When all this had ended, the Israelites who were there went out to the towns of Judah, smashed the sacred stones and cut down the Asherah poles. They destroyed the high places and the altars throughout Judah and Benjamin and in Ephraim and Manasseh. After they had destroyed all of them, the Israelites returned to their own towns and to their own property."* (2 Chron. 31:1). The tithe was also asked for and given, not only of money but also flocks and grain and other fruits of the land: *"As soon as the order went out, the Israelites generously gave the firstfruits of their grain, new wine, olive oil and honey and all that the fields produced. They brought a great amount, a tithe of everything. The people of Israel and Judah who lived in the towns of Judah also brought a tithe of their herds and flocks and a tithe of the holy things dedicated to the Lord their God, and they piled them in heaps. They began doing this in the third month and finished in the seventh month. When Hezekiah and his officials came and saw the heaps, they praised the Lord and blessed his people Israel."* (2 Chron. 31:5-8) The generosity was contagious, and it brought real joy to the people.

The Chronicler concludes with these words, attesting to the goodness that Hezekiah was able to bring as a blessing to his people: *"This is what Hezekiah did throughout Judah, doing what was good and right and faithful before the* LORD *his God. In everything that he undertook in the service of God's temple and in obedience to the law and the commands, he sought his God and worked wholeheartedly. And so he prospered."* (2 Chron. 31:20-21)

King Hezekiah in a 17th-century painting by unknown artist in the choir of Sankta Maria kyrka in Åhus, Sweden.

John 18:1-23

Notably missing from John's gospel is the detailed account of Jesus' prayer to the Father right before His betrayal and arrest. John' gospel simply states: *"When he had finished praying, Jesus left with his disciples and crossed the Kidron Valley. On the other side there was a garden, and he and his disciples went into it."* (John 18:1). In the Synoptic *gospels*, there is a leyt more detailed about the agonizing prayer that Jesus prayed *(Luke 22:42) "Father, if you are willing, take this cup from me; yet not my will, but yours be done."* The pivotal prayer in history, the hinge around which all of mankind's history turns, is these words- *not my will, but yours*.

Jesus' will would certainly be as ours- to escape the horror of the cross and the abandonment of His disciples, and yet He prayed "yours be done". And in that moment Satan was forever defeated and God forever established His Son in glory… at His right hand!

And so the drama played out. Jesus already knew who His betrayer was, and what he was going to do. He already knew that He was to stand a mock trial at night, and be accused of all manner of things, including blasphemy- the "final straw" to his accusers. And yet He rose above it all, forgiving and healing even those who would falsely arrest Him: *"Jesus answered, "I told you that I am he. If you are looking for me, then let these men go." This happened so that the words he had spoken would be fulfilled: "I have not lost one of those you gave me." Then Simon Peter, who had a sword, drew it and struck the high priest's servant, cutting off his right ear. (The servant's name was Malchus.) Jesus commanded Peter, "Put your sword away! Shall I not drink the cup the Father has given me?"* (John 18:8-11). And they took Hiom to Annas and Caiphas, who had said it would be better for one person to be sacrificed than to bring suffering on the entire people of God: *"Then the detachment of soldiers with its commander and the Jewish officials arrested Jesus. They bound him and brought him first to Annas, who was the father-in-law of Caiaphas, the high priest that year. Caiaphas was the one who had advised the Jewish leaders that it would be good if one man died for the people."* (John 18-12-14).

Peter, who has sworn he would "go to his death" for Jesus (Matthew 26:35), followed behind, wondering what was to come next. Would they all be arrested and crucified? Would they all be brought to trial? And his courage vanished as he faced the reality of what was happening around him, and he denied Jesus, just as the Master had predicted: *"Simon Peter and another disciple were following Jesus. Because this disciple was known to the high priest, he went with Jesus into the high priest's courtyard, but Peter had to wait outside at the door. The other disciple, who was known to the high priest, came back, spoke to the servant girl on duty there and brought Peter in. "You aren't one of this man's disciples too, are you?" she asked Peter. He replied, "I am not." It was cold, and the servants and officials stood around a fire they had made to keep warm. Peter also was standing with them, warming himself."* (John 18:15-18)

The Denial of Saint Peter-Caravaggio (1610)

2 Chronicles 32-33 June 10, 2014 John 18:24-40

God never promises us the absence of stress and conflict, only that he will be with us and give us strength, guidance and joy. He does not even guarantee victory over the enemies that surround us, but provides strength and help in times of need (Psalm 46:1). Hezekiah was faithful and full of God's grace, but his enemies still threatened him. One of the most serious- and well armed- of his enemies was Assyria. Sennacherib was the threat: *"After all that Hezekiah had so faithfully done, Sennacherib king of Assyria came and invaded Judah. He laid siege to the fortified cities, thinking to conquer them for himself. When Hezekiah saw that Sennacherib had come and that he intended to wage war against Jerusalem, he consulted with his officials and military staff about blocking off the water from the springs outside the city, and they helped him. They gathered a large group of people who blocked all the springs and the stream that flowed through the land. "Why should the kings of Assyria come and find plenty of water?" they said. Then he worked hard repairing all the broken sections of the wall and building towers on it. He built another wall outside that one and reinforced the terraces] of the City of David. He also made large numbers of weapons and shields. He appointed military officers over the people and assembled them before him in the square at the city gate and encouraged them with these words: "Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid or discouraged because of the king of Assyria and the vast army with him, for there is*

a greater power with us than with him. With him is only the arm of flesh, but with us is the Lord our God to help us and to fight our battles." And the people gained confidence from what Hezekiah the king of Judah said. (2 Chron. 32:1-8)

Sennacherib showed his pride and hubris when he lay siege to Lacish. His words were mocking God and the people of God, and the outcome was similar to that when Goliath mocked the True God and His people. Sennacherib's words were boastful and proud: *"This is what Sennacherib king of Assyria says: On what are you basing your confidence, that you remain in Jerusalem under siege? When Hezekiah says, 'The Lord our God will save us from the hand of the king of Assyria,' he is misleading you, to let you die of hunger and thirst. Did not Hezekiah himself remove this god's high places and altars, saying to Judah and Jerusalem, 'You must worship before one altar and burn sacrifices on it'? "Do you not know what I and my predecessors have done to all the peoples of the other lands? Were the gods of those nations ever able to deliver their land from my hand? Who of all the gods of these nations that my predecessors destroyed has been able to save his people from me? How then can your god deliver you from my hand? Now do not let Hezekiah deceive you and mislead you like this. Do not believe him, for no god of any nation or kingdom has been able to deliver his people from my hand or the hand of my predecessors. How much less will your god deliver you from my hand!"* (2 Chron. 32:10-15).

God's prople had a secret weapon- faith and confidence in the powere of God, and in God's desire to punish those who insult and belittle Him and His people. Isaiah and Hezekiah were in prayer together, praying for and expecting God's deliverance. The deliverance came, in such a way that the power and might of God could not be doubted: *"King Hezekiah and the prophet Isaiah son of Amoz cried out in prayer to heaven about this. And the Lord sent an angel, who annihilated all the fighting men and the commanders and officers in the camp of the Assyrian king. So he withdrew to his own land in disgrace. And when he went into the temple of his god, some of his sons, his own flesh and blood, cut him down with the sword. So the Lord saved Hezekiah and the people of Jerusalem from the hand of Sennacherib king of Assyria and from the hand of all others. He took care of them on every side. Many brought offerings to Jerusalem for the Lord and valuable gifts for Hezekiah king of Judah. From then on he was highly regarded by all the nations."* (2 Chron. 32:20-23)

Hezekiah, like so many of us, had issues with pride. He correctly gave God credit for the deliverance from Sennacerib, but became overly proud and "self righteous". He even invited Babylonian envoys to the Temple and displayed to theam "all he had". This pride was to lead to later difficulties. He was also miraculously healed, and his healing may have significantly contributed to his hubris and self righteousness. This story is recorded in more detail elsewhere in Scripture: "*The narrative of Hezekiah's sickness and miraculous recovery is found in 2 Kings 20:1, 2 Chronicles 32:24, Isaiah 38:1. Various ambassadors came to congratulate him on his recovery, among them from Merodach-baladan, the king of Babylon (2 Chronicles 32:23; 2 Kings 20:12). Hezekiah is also remembered for giving too much information to Baladan, king of Babylon (or perhaps for boasting about his wealth), for which he was confronted by Isaiah the prophet (2 Kings 20:12-19).According to the Talmud, the disease came about because of a dispute between him and Isaiah over who should pay whom a visit and over Hezekiah's refusal to marry and have*

children. According to Isaiah 38:5, Hezekiah lived another 15 more years of life after praying to God. Some Talmudists also considered that it might have come about as a way for Hezekiah to purge his sins or due to his arrogance in assuming his righteousness." (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hezekiah) The Scriptures note the end of Hezekiah's reign, and his successor, his son Manasseh, as follows: *"The other events of Hezekiah's reign and his acts of devotion are written in the vision of the prophet Isaiah son of Amoz in the book of the kings of Judah and Israel. Hezekiah rested with his ancestors and was buried on the hill where the tombs of David's descendants are. All Judah and the people of Jerusalem honored him when he died. And Manasseh his son succeeded him as king."* (2 Chron.32:32-33).

Manasseh started his reign as a "young king", but unlike many of the other "young kings" of Judah he was evil and did evil in God's sight: *"Manasseh was twelve years old when he became king, and he reigned in Jerusalem fifty-five years. He did evil in the eyes of the Lord, following the detestable practices of the nations the Lord had driven out before the Israelites. He rebuilt the high places his father Hezekiah had demolished; he also erected altars to the Baals and made Asherah poles. He bowed down to all the starry hosts and worshiped them. He built altars in the temple of the Lord, of which the Lord had said, "My Name will remain in Jerusalem forever." In both courts of the temple of the Lord, he built altars to all the starry hosts. He sacrificed his children in the fire in the Valley of Ben Hinnom, practiced divination and witchcraft, sought omens, and consulted mediums and spiritists. He did much evil in the eyes of the Lord, arousing his anger. He took the image he had made and put it in God's temple, of which God had said to David and to his son Solomon, "In this temple and in Jerusalem, which I have chosen out of all the tribes of Israel, I will put my Name forever. I will not again make the feet of the Israelites leave the land I assigned to your ancestors, if only they will be careful to do everything I commanded them concerning all the laws, decrees and regulations given through Moses." But Manasseh led Judah and the people of Jerusalem astray, so that they did more evil than the nations the Lord had destroyed before the Israelites."* (2 Chron. 33:1-9). The detestable practices include altars to Baal, bowing to the starry hosts, and child sacrifice. It is no wonder that the Chronicler concludes that there was more evil in Judah than their surrounding pagan nations (verse 9).

As happens so many times in Scripture, and in our lives, when God speaks we simply don't listedn. Many times He uses circumstances to humble us and show who He is! This was true of Manasseh, and God also showed forgiveness by restoring him to power:

"The Lord spoke to Manasseh and his people, but they paid no attention. So the Lord brought against them the army commanders of the king of Assyria, who took Manasseh prisoner, put a hook in his nose, bound him with bronze shackles and took him to Babylon. In his distress he sought the favor of the Lord his God and humbled himself greatly before the God of his ancestors. And when he prayed to him, the Lord was moved by his entreaty and listened to his plea; so he brought him back to Jerusalem and to his kingdom. Then Manasseh knew that the Lord is God." (2 Chron 33:10-13) The conclusion drawn by the Chronicler as to Manasseh's reign is given this way: *"The other events of Manasseh's reign, including his prayer to his God and the words the seers spoke to him in the name of the Lord, the God of Israel, are written in the annals of the kings of Israel. His prayer and how God was*

moved by his entreaty, as well as all his sins and unfaithfulness, and the sites where he built high places and set up Asherah poles and idols before he humbled himself—all these are written in the records of the seers. Manasseh rested with his ancestors and was buried in his palace. And Amon his son succeeded him as king." (2 Chron.33:18-20) So Manasseh is a type of our own spiritual life- believing after we are shown what belief and trust really is, and what God's demands of rightwous living really are!

Amon, Manasseh's son and successor, was an evil king who reigned two years in Judah. His bief story is: *"Amon was twenty-two years old when he became king, and he reigned in Jerusalem two years. He did evil in the eyes of the Lord, as his father Manasseh had done. Amon worshiped and offered sacrifices to all the idols Manasseh had made. But unlike his father Manasseh, he did not humble himself before the Lord; Amon increased his guilt. Amon's officials conspired against him and assassinated him in his palace. Then the people of the land killed all who had plotted against King Amon, and they made Josiah his son king in his place."* (2 Chron. 33:21-25) Not only was Amon assassinated by his own officials (after only two years!) but then the people removed those who assassinated him as well. It was certainly time for another "good" king, and Josiah was to meet that standard.

John 18:24-40

How could Peter- the "Rock" have denied Jesus? He would seem to be the strongest of the disciples, and was certainly made of sturdy spiritual stuff as well. Yet Peter denied Jesus, just as Jesus said he would, not once but three times! The Synpotic gospels add the detail that after the cock crowed near dawn, and Peter realized what he had done, that he wept bitterly (Matthew 26:69-75). It is certianly no wonder that he did.

Now things are moving quickly. Jesus' enemies hold an illegal trila under cover of darkness, and had accused Him and found Him "guilty" of blasphemy. John's gospel only records that the high priest took Jesus to Pilate, who had the authority to impose the death penalty. Not wishing to "contaminate" themselves ritually, the Jewish leaders did not enter Pilate's dwelling but stayed outside: *'Then the Jewish leaders took Jesus from Caiaphas to the palace of the Roman governor. By now it was early morning, and to avoid ceremonial uncleanness they did not enter the palace, because they wanted to be able to eat the Passover. So Pilate came out to them and asked, "What charges are you bringing against this man?" "If he were not a criminal," they replied, "we would not have handed him over to you." Pilate said, "Take him yourselves and judge him by your own law." "But we have no right to execute anyone," they objected. This took place to fulfill what Jesus had said about the kind of death he was going to die."* (John 18:28-32) Pilate rightfully challenges their conclusion that this is a "criminal" and that He is deserving of death. However, ultimately his conscience and personal feelings are overridden by political considerations (among them his perceived ability in Rome to handle his subjects) as well as pressure brought by the Jewish leaders themselves. Pilate has mixed feelings about this One- whom he no doubt had heard about- but had enough of a moral compass to realize that this One was a victim of trumped up and false charges. It was clear the Jewish leaders wanted Him dead, it was certainly not clear that this was fair and just. Pilate questioned Jesus, found no real fault in Him-

certainly not any deservibg death- and he tried to divert the wrath of the Jewish leades by "tossing them a bone"- Bar Abbas (Barabbas): *"Pilate then went back inside the palace, summoned Jesus and asked him, "Are you the king of the Jews?" "Is that your own idea," Jesus asked, "or did others talk to you about me?" "Am I a Jew?" Pilate replied. "Your own people and chief priests handed you over to me. What is it you have done?" Jesus said, "My kingdom is not of this world. If it were, my servants would fight to prevent my arrest by the Jewish leaders. But now my kingdom is from another place." "You are a king, then!" said Pilate. Jesus answered, "You say that I am a king. In fact, the reason I was born and came into the world is to testify to the truth. Everyone on the side of truth listens to me." "What is truth?" retorted Pilate. With this he went out again to the Jews gathered there and said, "I find no basis for a charge against him. But it is your custom for me to release to you one prisoner at the time of the Passover. Do you want me to release 'the king of the Jews'?" They shouted back, "No, not him! Give us Barabbas!" Now Barabbas had taken part in an uprising.* (John 18:33-40).

So was Pilate a tragic figure, a moral and just leader who was caught up in a plot of intrigue and "legal murder"? He is one of many I would like to meet and talk with. I often wondered what he thought of the Resurrection story.

2 Chronicles 34-36 June 11, 2014 John 19:1-22

The story of Josiah is one of the few in Scripture that is almost all positive. At the very young age of eight, Josiah quickly determined that his people had been ingnorant of- but still accountable to- the Law of God. It is commendable that once the Law was re-discovered- found during restoration of the Temple- it was quickly taken to heart as the center of true worship in Judah. The king repented and was soon to require all the people to hear the Words of the Law: *"While they were bringing out the money that had been taken into the temple of the Lord, Hilkiah the priest found the Book of the Law of the Lord that had been given through Moses. Hilkiah said to Shaphan the secretary, "I have found the Book of the Law in the temple of the Lord." He gave it to Shaphan. Then Shaphan took the book to the king and reported to him: "Your officials are doing everything that has been committed to them. They have paid out the money that was in the temple of the Lord and have entrusted it to the supervisors and workers." Then Shaphan the secretary informed the king, "Hilkiah the priest has given me a book." And Shaphan read from it in the presence of the king. When the king heard the words of the Law, he tore his robes. He gave these orders to Hilkiah, Ahikam son of Shaphan, Abdon son of Micah, Shaphan the secretary and Asaiah the king's attendant: "Go and inquire of the Lord for me and for the remnant in Israel and Judah about what is written in this book that has been found. Great is the Lord's anger that is poured out on us because those who have gone before us have not kept the word of the Lord; they have not acted in accordance with all that is written in this book."* (2 Chron. 2:14-21)

It is written in Scripture that "faith comes by hearing" (Romans 10:17), and the people were given the opportunity to hear the Word of God, as read by the king himself: *"Then the king called together all the elders of Judah and Jerusalem. He went up to the temple of the Lord with the people of Judah, the inhabitants of Jerusalem, the priests and the Levites—all the people from the least to the greatest.*

He read in their hearing all the words of the Book of the Covenant, which had been found in the temple of the Lord. The king stood by his pillar and renewed the covenant in the presence of the Lord—to follow the Lord and keep his commands, statutes and decrees with all his heart and all his soul, and to obey the words of the covenant written in this book. Then he had everyone in Jerusalem and Benjamin pledge themselves to it; the people of Jerusalem did this in accordance with the covenant of God, the God of their ancestors." (2 Chron. 34:29-32). The hearing was accompanied and followed by action- the idols were removed and the people listened to and served their God.

Significantly, the observance of Passover was returned to the religious and spiritual life of God's people. It had been many years since Passover was observed, and Josiah wanted the return to this practice to be a memorable one*: "So at that time the entire service of the Lord was carried out for the celebration of the Passover and the offering of burnt offerings on the altar of the Lord, as King Josiah had ordered. The Israelites who were present celebrated the Passover at that time and observed the Festival of Unleavened Bread for seven days. The Passover had not been observed like this in Israel since the days of the prophet Samuel; and none of the kings of Israel had ever celebrated such a Passover as did Josiah, with the priests, the Levites and all Judah and Israel who were there with the people of Jerusalem. This Passover was celebrated in the eighteenth year of Josiah's reign."* (2 Chron. 35:16-19). In ten years the Temple had been restored, funded by God's people, the Law was discovered, read to all, and pledged allegiance to, and the Passover observance was re-established.

All seemed to be well, until Josiah inexplicably decided to go to war with Egypt. The Scripture tells us: "After all this, when Josiah had set the temple in order, Necho king of Egypt went up to fight at Carchemish on the Euphrates, and Josiah marched out to meet him in battle. 21 But Necho sent messengers to him, saying, "What quarrel is there, king of Judah, between you and me? It is not you I am attacking at this time, but the house with which I am at war. God has told me to hurry; so stop opposing God, who is with me, or he will destroy you."(2 Chron. 35:20-21). The Daily Bible Study with Wayne Blank syas this about Pharaoh Necho and the unnecessary war b etween him and Josiah: *Pharaoh Necho was the king of Egypt approximately 610-595 BC. He reigned at the same time as King Josiah of Judah (see Kings of Israel and Judah) and was involved in the selection of Josiah's successor after Josiah was killed in an unnecessary battle against Egyptian forces. Necho had declared war on Assyria (see Ancient Empires - Assyria), and while Egyptian forces were merely passing through the land of Israel on the way to what is today Iraq, Josiah chose to engage them in battle at Megiddo (also known as Armageddon) where Josiah was mortally wounded.*
(http://www.keyway.ca/htm2004/20040418.htm)

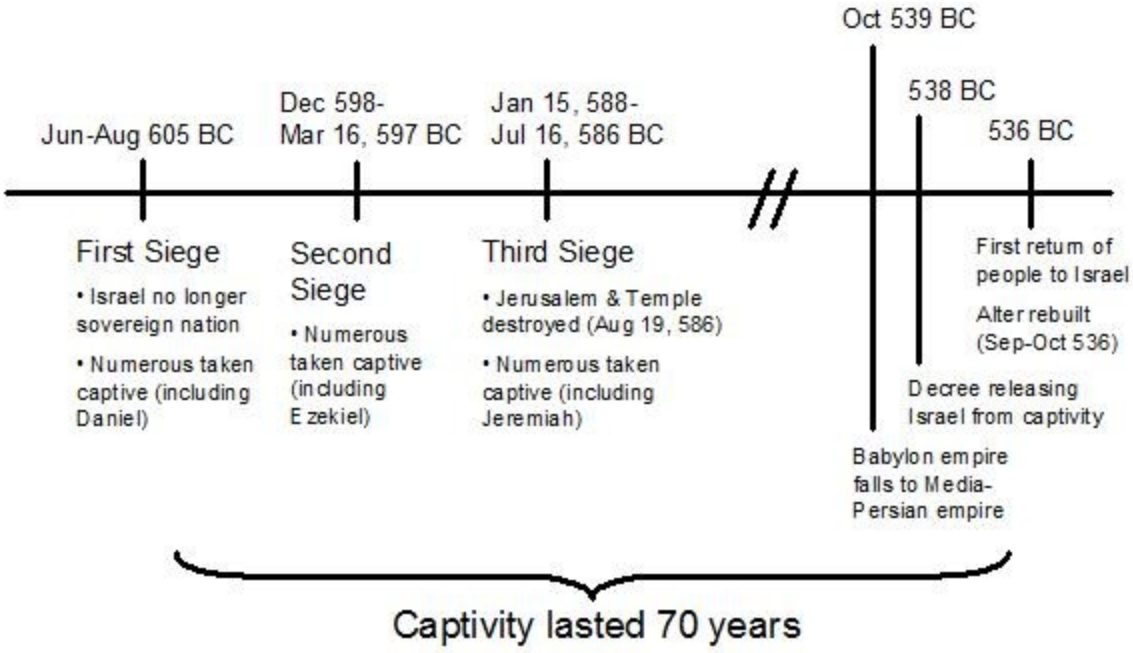
So did Josiah simply object to Necho passing through Judah on the way to Assyria, or were there other reasons that he went to war? Necho plainly warned Josiah that God had told the Pharaoh to "hurry"- presumably to accomplish his combat mission- but Josiah opposed him (and therefore opposed God in the process).Josiah was tragically killed in battle- even though disguised- and was succeeded by his son, Jehoahaz. (2 Chron 36:1).

Jehoahaz only lasted two months as king, before he was deposed by the Pharaoh and his brother given rule: *"Jehoahaz was twenty-three years old when he became king, and he reigned in Jerusalem three months. The king of Egypt dethroned him in Jerusalem and imposed on Judah a levy of a hundred talents of silver and a talent of gold. The king of Egypt made Eliakim, a brother of Jehoahaz, king over Judah and Jerusalem and changed Eliakim's name to Jehoiakim. But Necho took Eliakim's brother Jehoahaz and carried him off to Egypt."* (2 Chron 36:2-4) The puppet king Jehoiakim was put in power by the Pharaoh, and he reigned eleven years and "did evil" in God's sight: *"Jehoiakim was twenty-five years old when he became king, and he reigned in Jerusalem eleven years. He did evil in the eyes of the LORD his God. Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon attacked him and bound him with bronze shackles to take him to Babylon. Nebuchadnezzar also took to Babylon articles from the temple of the LORD and put them in his temple there. The other events of Jehoiakim's reign, the detestable things he did and all that was found against him, are written in the book of the kings of Israel and Judah. And Jehoiachin his son succeeded him as king."* (2 Chron. 36:5-8). Jehoiakim was followed by Jehoaichin, his son. He ewigned three months, after which he was taken to Babylon by Nebuchadnezzar, the king of Babylon.The Chronicler tells us*: "Jehoiachin was eighteen years old when he became king, and he reigned in Jerusalem three months and ten days. He did evil in the eyes of the Lord. In the spring, King Nebuchadnezzar sent for him and brought him to Babylon, together with articles of value from the temple of the Lord, and he made Jehoiachin's uncle, Zedekiah, king over Judah and Jerusalem."* (2 Chron. 36:9-10) This "uncle king" was the last before the Babylonoian Captivity.

While Zedekiah was king, the prople rebelled against God and returned to the pagan practices of the people who surrounded them. God was reluctant to abandon them, but then allowed Nebuchadnezzar to overrun Jerusalem and take many into captivity. The Chronicler ends with a note of hope- as Cyrus becomes king he is persuaded to allow some of the captive Hebrews to return to their land and start rebuilding the Temple: *"The LORD, the God of their ancestors, sent word to them through his messengers again and again, because he had pity on his people and on his dwelling place. But they mocked God's messengers, despised his words and scoffed at his prophets until the wrath of the LORD was aroused against his people and there was no remedy. He brought up against them the king of the Babylonians, who killed their young men with the sword in the sanctuary, and did not spare young men or young women, the elderly or the infirm. God gave them all into the hands of Nebuchadnezzar. He carried to Babylon all the articles from the temple of God, both large and small, and the treasures of the LORD's temple and the treasures of the king and his officials. They set fire to God's temple and broke down the wall of Jerusalem; they burned all the palaces and destroyed everything of value there.*

He carried into exile to Babylon the remnant, who escaped from the sword, and they became servants to him and his successors until the kingdom of Persia came to power. The land enjoyed its sabbath rests; all the time of its desolation it rested, until the seventy years were completed in fulfillment of the word of the LORD spoken by Jeremiah. In the first year of Cyrus king of Persia, in order to fulfill the word of theLORD spoken by Jeremiah, the LORD moved the heart of Cyrus king of Persia to make a proclamation throughout his realm and also to put it in writing: "This is what Cyrus king of Persia says: "'The LORD, the God of heaven, has

given me all the kingdoms of the earth and he has appointed me to build a temple for him at Jerusalem in Judah. Any of his people among you may go up, and may the LORD their God be with them.'" (2 Chron 36:15-23)



John 19:1-22

And now the plans and plots of Jesus' enemies find their awful fulfilment- the very Son of Man, the Master, and the Savior, is to be put to death at the hands of the Romans. Pilate handed Him over to be flogged, perhaps hoping that when the people saw His disfigured body and terrible wouds they would relent. But the crowd- spurred on by their jealous and evil- thinking leadres, clamored even more for crucifixion: *"Then Pilate took Jesus and had him flogged. The soldiers twisted together a crown of thorns and put it on his head. They clothed him in a purple robe and went up to him again and again, saying, "Hail, king of the Jews!" And they slapped him in the face. Once more Pilate came out and said to the Jews gathered there, "Look, I am bringing him out to you to let you know that I find no basis for a charge against him." When Jesus came out wearing the crown of thorns and the purple robe, Pilate said to them, "Here is the man!" As soon as the chief priests and their officials saw him, they shouted, "Crucify! Crucify!"* (John 19:1-6) And Pilate, much to his credit, tries again to save this One in whom he found no guilt: *"But Pilate answered, "You take him and crucify him. As for me, I find no basis for a charge against him." The Jewish leaders insisted, "We have a law, and according to that law he must die, because he claimed to be the Son of God." When Pilate heard this, he was even more afraid, 9 and he went back inside the palace. "Where do you come from?" he asked Jesus, but Jesus gave him no answer. "Do you refuse to speak to me?" Pilate said. "Don't you realize I have power either to free you or to crucify you?" Jesus answered, "You would have no power over me if it were not given to you from above. Therefore the one who handed me over to you is guilty of a greater sin." From then on, Pilate tried to set Jesus free, but the Jewish leaders kept shouting, "If you let this man go, you are no friend of Caesar. Anyone who*

claims to be a king opposes Caesar." When Pilate heard this, he brought Jesus out and sat down on the judge's seat at a place known as the Stone Pavement (which in Aramaic is Gabbatha). It was the day of Preparation of the Passover; it was about noon. "Here is your king," Pilate said to the Jews. But they shouted, "Take him away! Take him away! Crucify him!" "Shall I crucify your king?" Pilate asked. "We have no king but Caesar," the chief priests answered. Finally Pilate handed him over to them to be crucified. (John 19:6b-16) In John's portrayal, Pilate is seen as one who kept trying to set Jesus free. He may have been afraid of this "righteous man" his wife had dreamed about (Matt. 27:19). He was also afraid that the Roman government, and in particular his superiors, would see him as incapable of preventing trouble in Palestine. Whatever the reason, Pliate tried heroically but did not succeed in preventing this horrendous execution. But God had a plan!

The the awful execution took place, after Pilate handed Jesus over "to be crucified" (John 19:16). The soldiers took charge, some of which had undoubtedly been on "execution detail" before. As much as someone could become accustomed to such a grisly duty, they probably had. They placed Him between two thieves, one to the right and one to the left. And Pilate ordered a sign put over Jesus' head- "Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews". Despite the objections of the "leaders" to change the wording to "This man claimed to be the King of the Jews", Pilate held firm and refused to budge: *"What I have written I have written"* (John 19:22)

Ezra 1-2 June 12, 2014 John 19:23-42

A foreign pagan king fulfilling prophesy? How could this happen? Yet Go, the author and creator of everything, in His will moved the heart of Cyrus to release selected numbers of the exiled Hebrews to return to Jerusalem and rebuild their Temple and city. Persia had just conquered Babylon, and Cyrus established a good relationship with the leaders of the exiled Jews. (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cyrus_the_Great_in_the_Bible) And so the exiles returned under the leadership of Ezra the priest. Originally the books of Ezra and Nehemiah were one book which were later divided when the canon was established. (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Book_of_Ezra)

And so the proclamation was made: *"In the first year of Cyrus king of Persia, in order to fulfill the word of the Lord spoken by Jeremiah, the Lord moved the heart of Cyrus king of Persia to make a proclamation throughout his realm and also to put it in writing: 2 "This is what Cyrus king of Persia says: "'The Lord, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth and he has appointed me to build a temple for him at Jerusalem in Judah. 3 Any of his people among you may go up to Jerusalem in Judah and build the temple of the Lord, the God of Israel, the God who is in Jerusalem, and may their God be with them. 4 And in any locality where survivors may now be living, the people are to provide them with silver and gold, with goods and livestock, and with freewill offerings for the temple of God in Jerusalem.'"* (Ezra 1:1-4). And God also moved in the hearts of His captive people and gave them the motivation to move away from their "adopted" home: *"Then the family heads of Judah and Benjamin, and the priests and Levites—everyone whose heart God had moved—prepared to go up and build the house of the Lord in Jerusalem. 6 All their neighbors assisted them with articles of silver and gold, with goods and livestock, and with valuable gifts, in addition to all the freewill offerings.*

Moreover, King Cyrus brought out the articles belonging to the temple of the Lord, which Nebuchadnezzar had carried away from Jerusalem and had placed in the temple of his god.[a] 8 Cyrus king of Persia had them brought by Mithredath the treasurer, who counted them out to Sheshbazzar the prince of Judah." (Ezra 1:5-8). All totaled, the people returning to Jerusalem amassed 5400 articles of silver and gold: *"In all, there were 5,400 articles of gold and of silver. Sheshbazzar brought all these along with the exiles when they came up from Babylon to Jerusalem."* (Ezra 1:11)

Ezra 2 consistes of a census of all those returning to Jerusalem, listed by family or clan. Altogether there were 42,360 persons returning: "The whole company numbered 42,360, 65 besides their 7,337 male and female slaves; and they also had 200 male and female singers. 66 They had 736 horses, 245 mules, 67 435 camels and 6,720 donkeys." (Ezra 2:64). There were two major taks ahead of the former exiles: 1) rebuilding the altar; and 2) rebuilding the Temple. It should be emphasized that the people returning to rebuild and worship were vulnerable to attack from outsiders, since the walls of the city were in complete disrepair. These tasks are described in detail in Ezra 3. The book of Nehemiah focuses on the rebuilding of the city walls.(http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Book_of_Nehemiah)

Depiction of Cyrus the Great by Jean Fouquet, 1470

John 19:23-42

Then the soldiers divided Jesus' clothing into shares, and cast lots to see who would get them. They decided not to tear the seamless garment that he wore. This was fulfilment of prophesy: "They divided my clothes among them and cast lots for my garment." (John 19:24b quoting Psalm 22:18). Near the cross stood the "three Marys" and the beloved disciple (by tradition, John) and they were ministered to by Jesus. Even as He was dying on the cross, Jesus was preparing for the care of His mother after His earthly life was over! "Near the cross of Jesus stood his mother, his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene. 26 When Jesus saw his mother there, and the disciple whom he loved standing nearby, he said to her, "Woman,[b] here is your son," 27 and to the disciple, "Here is your mother." From that time on, this disciple took her into his home." (John 19:25-17).

And Jesus' great work on earth was now finished. He could rejoin His Father and regain His place of glory at God's right hand: *"Later, knowing that everything had now been finished, and so that Scripture would be fulfilled, Jesus said, "I am thirsty." A jar of wine vinegar was there, so they soaked a sponge in it, put the sponge on a stalk of the hyssop plant, and lifted it to Jesus' lips. When he had received the drink, Jesus said, "It is finished." With that, he bowed his head and gave up his spirit."* (John 19:28-30) Clarke's commentary is particularly helpful in interpreting verse 28: *"I thirst - The scripture that referred to his drinking the vinegar is Psalm 69:21. The fatigue which he had undergone, the grief he had felt, the heat of the day, and the loss of blood, were the natural causes of this thirst. This he would have borne without complaint; but he wished to give them the fullest proof of his being the Messiah, by distinctly marking how every thing relative to the Messiah, which had been written in the prophets, had its complete fulfillment in him."* (http://www.godvine.com/bible/john/19-28)

Two more prophetic Scriptures would be fulfilled after Jesus' death (clearly it would have been impossible for Jesus to "maniplulate these events" as claimed in the Passover Plot!): *"Now it was the day of Preparation, and the next day was to be a special Sabbath. Because the Jewish leaders did not want the bodies left on the crosses during the Sabbath, they asked Pilate to have the legs broken and the bodies taken down. The soldiers therefore came and broke the legs of the first man who had been crucified with Jesus, and then those of the other. But when they came to Jesus and found that he was already dead, they did not break his legs. Instead, one of the soldiers pierced Jesus' side with a spear, bringing a sudden flow of blood and water. The man who saw it has given testimony, and his testimony is true. He knows that he tells the truth, and he testifies so that you also may believe. These things happened so that the scripture would be fulfilled: "Not one of his bones will be broken,"and, as another scripture says, "They will look on the one they have pierced."* (John 19:31-37). The two references in the Scriptures are: 1) Exodus 12:46; Num. 9:12; Psalm 34:20; and 2) Zech. 12:10.

The blood and water that issued from Jesus after His death have been the subject of some discussion. Some have commented on the medical and clinical aspects of this phenomenon (http://www.gotquestions.org/blood-water-Jesus.html), while others have focused on the spiritual significance of the blood (the Eucharist) and water (baptism) (http://christianity.stackexchange.com/questions/8968/what-is-the-

significance-of-water-from-jesus-side) This issue of blood and water was a very important fact to be verified, as the gospel writer emphasizes in verse 35.

Jesus was given a proper burial, primarily because of the love and generosity of Joseph of Arimethea, who was clearly a follower and perhaps a friend of the Lord: *"Later, Joseph of Arimathea asked Pilate for the body of Jesus. Now Joseph was a disciple of Jesus, but secretly because he feared the Jewish leaders. With Pilate's permission, he came and took the body away. He was accompanied by Nicodemus, the man who earlier had visited Jesus at night. Nicodemus brought a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about seventy-five pounds. Taking Jesus' body, the two of them wrapped it, with the spices, in strips of linen. This was in accordance with Jewish burial customs. At the place where Jesus was crucified, there was a garden, and in the garden a new tomb, in which no one had ever been laid. Because it was the Jewish day of Preparation and since the tomb was nearby, they laid Jesus there."* (John 19:38-42). There was little time for the proper wrapping of the body and adding of burial spices since the time was short before the sundown marking the beginning of the Passover Sabbath.

Ezra 3-5 June 13, 2014 John 20

As mentioned before, there were several major tasks ahead for the returned exiles: 1) rebuilding the Altar; 2) rebuilding and reparing the Temple; and 3) rebuilding the walls of the city. There was reason to fear the countries surrounding the newly returned exiles- these were the traditional enemies of Israel. Yet the people made the Altar and the Temple their first priority, only later adding the wall repairs: *"Despite their fear of the peoples around them, they built the altar on its foundation and sacrificed burnt offerings on it to the Lord, both the morning and evening sacrifices. Then in accordance with what is written, they celebrated the Festival of Tabernacles with the required number of burnt offerings prescribed for each day. After that, they presented the regular burnt offerings, the New Moon sacrifices and the sacrifices for all the appointed sacred festivals of the Lord, as well as those brought as freewill offerings to the Lord. On the first day of the seventh month they began to offer burnt offerings to the Lord, though the foundation of the Lord's temple had not yet been laid."* (Ezra 3:3-6). And so the regular worship of God, in the land of the covenant and by God's people was re-established.

The Temple was also in grave need of repair. Materials were gathered- timber from Tyre and other building materials, and the builders began the work, supervised by the Levites. The first order of business was the reconstruction of the foundation of the temple. When this task was finished, there was great joy and rejoicing: *"When the builders laid the foundation of the temple of the LORD, the priests in their vestments and with trumpets, and the Levites (the sons of Asaph) with cymbals, took their places to praise the LORD, as prescribed by David king of Israel. With praise and thanksgiving they sang to the LORD: "He is good; his love toward Israel endures forever." And all the people gave a great shout of praise to the LORD, because the foundation of the house of the LORD was laid. But many of the older priests and Levites and family heads, who had seen the former temple, wept aloud when they saw the foundation of this temple being laid, while many others shouted*

for joy. No one could distinguish the sound of the shouts of joy from the sound of weeping, because the people made so much noise. And the sound was heard far away." (Ezra 3:10-13) I amreminded at times of the joy our mission team felt when we laid the concrete block walls of churches in Mexico- we had services of dedication, singing, praise and worship as we accomplished the building task God had placed us on. There is true joy in building for the glory of God!

Then opposition from the surrounding peoples "the enemies of Judah and Benjamin" (Ezra 4:1) began. First the enemies offered to "help" in the hbuilding. Much to their credit, the people of God refused, citing their authority from Cyrus, as well as knowing in their hearts that God would not be honored by such activity! Then the second tactic to discourage God's people and their projects was simple bribery*: "They bribed officials to work against them and frustrate their plans during the entire reign of Cyrus king of Persia and down to the reign of Darius king of Persia."* (Ezra 4:5) The third tactic was to wite letters to Xerxes and Ataxerxes, claiming that this project would take taxes and influence away from the royal reign. The letter to Xerxes said: "*To King Artaxerxes, From your servants in Trans-Euphrates: The king should know that the people who came up to us from you have gone to Jerusalem and are rebuilding that rebellious and wicked city. They are restoring the walls and repairing the foundations. Furthermore, the king should know that if this city is built and its walls are restored, no more taxes, tribute or duty will be paid, and eventually the royal revenues will suffer. Now since we are under obligation to the palace and it is not proper for us to see the king dishonored, we are sending this message to inform the king, so that a search may be made in the archives of your predecessors. In these records you will find that this city is a rebellious city, troublesome to kings and provinces, a place with a long history of sedition. That is why this city was destroyed. We inform the king that if this city is built and its walls are restored, you will be left with nothing in Trans-Euphrates."* (Ezra 4:11b-16). This letter had th4 effect of causing the work to be stopped, until the letter from Cyrus could be found. This was critically important, since Darius had succeeded Cyrus on the throne of Persia (http://wiki.answers.com/Q/Are_Darius_King_of_Persia_and_Cyrus_King_of_Persia_the_same_person) The letter to Darius read this way: *"We are the servants of the God of heaven and earth, and we are rebuilding the temple that was built many years ago, one that a great king of Israel built and finished. But because our ancestors angered the God of heaven, he gave them into the hands of Nebuchadnezzar the Chaldean, king of Babylon, who destroyed this temple and deported the people to Babylon. "However, in the first year of Cyrus king of Babylon, King Cyrus issued a decree to rebuild this house of God. He even removed from the temple[h] of Babylon the gold and silver articles of the house of God, which Nebuchadnezzar had taken from the temple in Jerusalem and brought to the temple in Babylon. Then King Cyrus gave them to a man named Sheshbazzar, whom he had appointed governor, and he told him, 'Take these articles and go and deposit them in the temple in Jerusalem. And rebuild the house of God on its site.' "So this Sheshbazzar came and laid the foundations of the house of God in Jerusalem. From that day to the present it has been under construction but is not yet finished." Now if it pleases the king, let a search be made in the royal archives of Babylon to see if King Cyrus did in fact issue a decree to rebuild this house of God in Jerusalem. Then let the king send us his decision in this matter."* (Ezra 5:11b-17) Several things are noteworthy

in this letter: 1) the people clarly identify the reason for their exile- the fact that their ancestors “angered the God of heaven”; 2) the credit for their return goes only partly to Cyrus- ultimately to God; 3) the humility of the letter in presenting the case to the “new king”. Certainly the Jews would be well-served to correct the impressions given by their enemies that they were evil and rebellious, but the tone of this letter is clearly conciliatory. And God again showed His people the power of His hand in working in the heart of still another king to allow His people to complete the work they had started so effectively.

We as God’s people should always expect opposition to our efforts on His behalf. Jesus told us clearly that we would not only be opposed but hated (Matt 10:22; Mark 13:13, John 15:18-19). We must take courage in the power of the One who motivates and directs us!

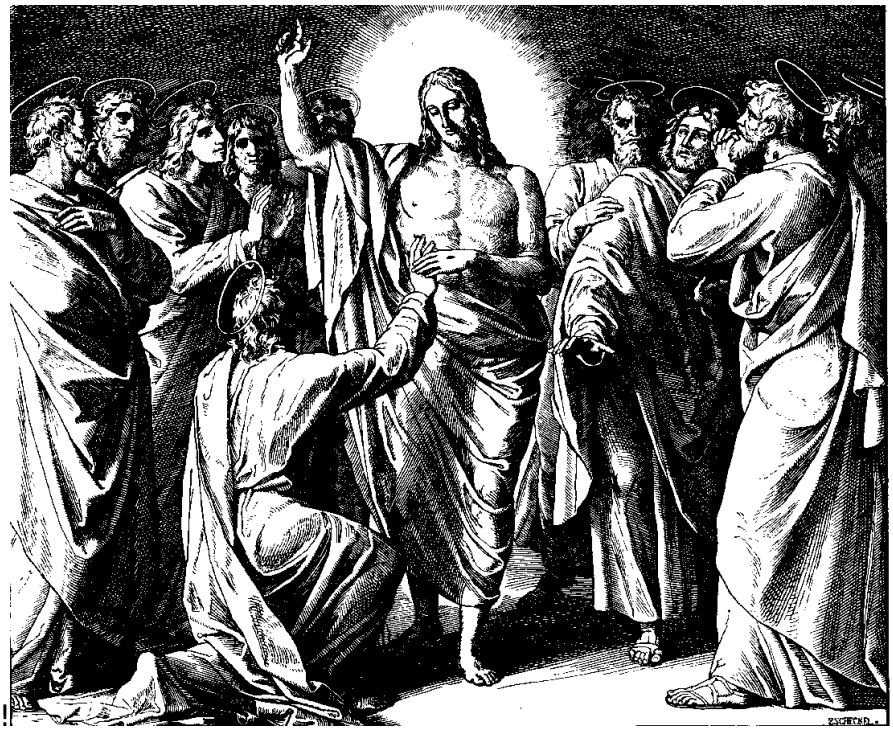
John 20

How can such amazing triumph come from a tragic execution, and a scatterd and dispirited group of friends and followers? Yet God, who is always in control. Made just that happen! Jesus rose from the dead, and accomplished several great works by His death and Resurrection: 1) He freed us forever from the power of sin and death; 2) He defeated the evil one once and for all, fulfilling the Edenic prophesy (Gen 3:15); 3) He gave instructions for His followers to wait for the empowering and filling of the Holy Spirit- the beginning of the church. And there are so many other things that were accomplished. John states clearly the purpose of his evangelical gospel “book” at the end of chapter 20 this way: *”Jesus performed many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.”* (John 20:30-31)

Peter was transformed from a fearful denier of the Master to one who literally “ran” to see the empty tomb and the Good News that it testified to. The disciples were beginning to be excited and hopeful, but they still did not understand: *“(They still did not understand from Scripture that Jesus had to rise from the dead.) Then the disciples went back to where they were staying.”* (John 20:9-10) Mary was changed from a grieving witness to the crucifixion to a joyful witness: *“Mary Magdalene went to the disciples with the news: “I have seen the Lord!” And she told them that he had said these things to her.”* (John 20:18). And all the disciples, even Thomas, saw, touched, heard and believed: *“On the evening of that first day of the week, when the disciples were together, with the doors locked for fear of the Jewish leaders, Jesus came and stood among them and said, “Peace be with you!” After he said this, he showed them his hands and side. The disciples were overjoyed when they saw the Lord. Again Jesus said, “Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you.” And with that he breathed on them and said, “Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive anyone’s sins, their sins are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven.”* (John 20:19-22). God didn’t wait- Jesus appeared to them on the evening of the first day of the week- the day we now as Christians celebrate as the Sabbath.

And there is real encouragement for those of us who have “come late to the Lord” through our unbelief, fear or our stubborn willfulness- Thomas did not believe until

an event a week later. Thomas epitomizes those “hard-headed” fact-finding and fact-trusting, “show me” Christians. I sometimes refer to them as “Missouri” Christians since Missouri is the “show me” state! Thomas stated clearly that he needed hard, cold facts and unimpeachable evidence to truly put his faith and trust in Jesus and believe He was resurrected. And Jesus showed him what he needed to see, and provided the reality he needed to experience- just as he does in His wonderful way to all of us! The doors were locked, and Thomas- ever the doubter- was present: *“A week later his disciples were in the house again, and Thomas was with them. Though the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, “Peace be with you!” Then he said to Thomas, “Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe.” Thomas said to him, “My Lord and my God!” Then Jesus told him, “Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.”* (John 20:26-29). And here we see the “last beautitude”- blessed are those who have NOT seen and yet have believed. We in this age are in that category. We have not “seen Him in the flesh”, but the evidence of His presence is around us wherever and whenever we look with eyes of faith!



http://zionhears.blogspot.com/2009/04/monday-april-13-2009-jesus-appearance.html

Ezra 6-8 June 14, 2014 John 21

Cyrus had issues a decree to facilitate the rebuilding of the Temple and of Jerusalem, but this decree was challenged. A diligent search was started for the document. In this modern age of digital documents and “cloud storage” it seems almost ludicrous that a decree- especially one that was as large and “physical” as this one, could be lost- especially one of such magnitude. The archaeologic finding of the “Cyrus Cylinder” is important in two aspects: 1) it suggestes the form and

complexity of these large “documents; 2) it may contain the decree that allowed the Jews to return to their homeland:

The Cyrus cylinder, which confirms that Cyrus allowed captives in Babylon to return to their native lands, earning him an honored place in Judaism.

The Scripture suggests that the actual decree was written on a more conventional document in the form of a scroll, which was found after a diligent search was made. The document found outlined Cyrus’ provisions and orders for the rebuilding of the Temple: *“King Darius then issued an order, and they searched in the archives stored in the treasury at Babylon. A scroll was found in the citadel of Ecbatana in the province of Media, and this was written on it:*

Memorandum:

In the first year of King Cyrus, the king issued a decree concerning the temple of God in Jerusalem:

Let the temple be rebuilt as a place to present sacrifices, and let its foundations be laid. It is to be sixty cubits[a] high and sixty cubits wide, with three courses of large stones and one of timbers. The costs are to be paid by the royal treasury. Also, the gold and silver articles of the house of God, which Nebuchadnezzar took from the temple in Jerusalem and brought to Babylon, are to be returned to their places in the temple in Jerusalem; they are to be deposited in the house of God.” (Ezra 6:1-5) A harsh penalty was prescribed for disobedience to this decree: *“Furthermore, I decree that if anyone defies this edict, a beam is to be pulled from their house and they are to be impaled on it. And for this crime their house is to be made a pile of rubble. May God, who has caused his Name to dwell there, overthrow any king or people who lifts a hand to change this decree or to destroy this temple in Jerusalem. I Darius have decreed it. Let it be carried out with diligence.”* (Ezra 6:11-12) It is certainly no wonder that Cyrus is almost universally praised by the Jews, and is regarded by some to be “a messiah”.

Having cleared up the authority for the rebuilding, the Temple construction was rapidly completed, and the people – led by the priests- rejoiced and offered sacrifices. They were at this tikme under the spiritual leadership of Haggai and Zechariah (Ezra 6:14). The Passover was then celebrated, and part of the joy the people felt was that a foreign king- the king of Assyria- had been persuaded to help the Jews in the completion of this key project (Ezra 6:22).

Then Ezra, with the blessing and protection of a letter from king Artaxerxes, returned to Jerusalem along with a large number of exiles. Artaxerxes wrote a very complementary and powerful letter, assuring Ezra that he had full authority to become the spiritual leader of his formerly exiled people: *Artaxerxes, king of kings, To Ezra the priest, teacher of the Law of the God of heaven: Greetings. Now I decree that any of the Israelites in my kingdom, including priests and Levites, who volunteer to go to Jerusalem with you, may go. You are sent by the king and his seven advisers to inquire about Judah and Jerusalem with regard to the Law of your God, which is in your hand. Moreover, you are to take with you the silver and gold that the king and his advisers have freely given to the God of Israel, whose dwelling is in Jerusalem, together with all the silver and gold you may obtain from the province of Babylon, as well as the freewill offerings of the people and priests for the temple of their God in Jerusalem. With this money be sure to buy bulls, rams and male lambs, together with their grain offerings and drink offerings, and sacrifice them on the altar of the temple of your God in Jerusalem. You and your fellow Israelites may then do whatever seems best with the rest of the silver and gold, in accordance with the will of your God. Deliver to the God of Jerusalem all the articles entrusted to you for worship in the temple of your God. And anything else needed for the temple of your God that you are responsible to supply, you may provide from the royal treasury. Now I, King Artaxerxes, decree that all the treasurers of Trans-Euphrates are to provide with diligence whatever Ezra the priest, the teacher of the Law of the God of heaven, may ask of you— up to a hundred talents of silver, a hundred cors of wheat, a hundred baths of wine, a hundred baths of olive oil, and salt without limit. Whatever the God of heaven has prescribed, let it be done with diligence for the temple of the God of heaven. Why should his wrath fall on the realm of the king and of his sons? You are also to know that you have no authority to impose taxes, tribute or duty on any of the priests, Levites, musicians, gatekeepers, temple servants or other workers at this house of God."* (Ezra 7:12-24)

The first part of Ezra 8 is a catalog of the leaders of the exiled families of Israel that returned with Ezra to the newly rebuilt city and Temple. (Ezra 8:1-14). Once the exiles arrived, with treasures in hand, they restored the treasures of the temple with joy and fasting. *"There, by the Ahava Canal, I (Ezra) proclaimed a fast, so that we might humble ourselves before our God and ask him for a safe journey for us and our children, with all our possessions. I was ashamed to ask the king for soldiers and horsemen to protect us from enemies on the road, because we had told the king, "The gracious hand of our God is on everyone who looks to him, but his great anger is against all who forsake him." So we fasted and petitioned our God about this, and he answered our prayer. Then I set apart twelve of the leading priests, namely, Sherebiah, Hashabiah and ten of their brothers, and I weighed out to them the offering of silver and gold and the articles that the king, his advisers, his officials and all Israel present there had donated for the house of our God. I weighed out to them 650 talents of silver, silver articles weighing 100 talents, 100 talents of gold, 27 20 bowls of gold valued at 1,000 darics, and two fine articles of polished bronze, as precious as gold."* (Ezra 8:21-27). It is important to note that not only the precious metal items were consecrated to the Lord- set aside for His use- but also the people themselves were also consecrated: *"I said to them, "You as well as these articles are consecrated to the Lord. The silver and gold are a freewill offering to the Lord, the God of your ancestors. Guard them carefully until you weigh them out in the chambers of the house of the Lord in Jerusalem before the*

leading priests and the Levites and the family heads of Israel." Then the priests and Levites received the silver and gold and sacred articles that had been weighed out to be taken to the house of our God in Jerusalem." (Ezra 8:28-30)

John 21

Who wants to go fishing? My Dad often asked us boys at family campouts, at Boy Scout camp, and other outdoor venues, if we would like to join in the sport and adventure of fishing. We fished for sport and recreation, some of the disciples fished as a profession. When Jesus appears to the disciples at the Lake of Galilee, they had been fishing without success for most of the night. Their nets were empty, they were tired and ready to go ashore and mend their nets and eat. Then Jesus asks them to do something remarkable- to continue fishing but to put the nets on the "other side" of the boat: *He called out to them, "Friends, haven't you any fish?" "No," they answered. 6 He said, "Throw your net on the right side of the boat and you will find some." When they did, they were unable to haul the net in because of the large number of fish. 7 Then the disciple whom Jesus loved said to Peter, "It is the Lord!" As soon as Simon Peter heard him say, "It is the Lord," he wrapped his outer garment around him (for he had taken it off) and jumped into the water. 8 The other disciples followed in the boat, towing the net full of fish, for they were not far from shore, about a hundred yards.[c] 9 When they landed, they saw a fire of burning coals there with fish on it, and some bread."* (John 21:5-9). Why did Jesus tell them to try again? Surely they were professional fisherman and knew how to fish. But Jesus' words were clear- *"throw your net on the right side of the boat and you will find some.."* We so often miss a blessing because we are so busy being the experts who "know" what is right or best that we miss the blessing of the Master's call to try another way. How eagerly we should hear and heed His call and direction!

Another intriguing detail is that when the fishermen came ashore, Jesus had already prepared them a fish and bread breakfast. One "take home message" here is thaere will undoubtedly be fish fries and good food in heaven! Even though the disciples had seen Jesus before twice, they were still a little overwhelmed by His presence. We can almost hear them thinking: "He is here, He is alive, our Friend is still with us and enjoying a meal with us." The Scripture portrays it this way: *"Jesus said to them, "Come and have breakfast." None of the disciples dared ask him, "Who are you?" They knew it was the Lord. Jesus came, took the bread and gave it to them, and did the same with the fish. This was now the third time Jesus appeared to his disciples after he was raised from the dead."* (John 21:12-14)

Jesus then asks Peter what must have seemed to be a strange question: When they had finished eating, Jesus said to Simon Peter, "Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?" "Yes, Lord," he said, "you know that I love you." Jesus said, "Feed my lambs." (John 21:15). Jesus then asks a second and third time- do you love me? The Scripture states that Peter was "hurt" because Jesus asked him the same question three times. Was Jesus remembering that only a few days ago that Peter had denied Him? Was Peter mistaken about what Jesus was asking? Some scholars have suggested that the English word "love" is entirely inadequate here. The koine Greek words are "phileo" and "agapao". The commentary is helpful here: *According to the NIV it is also a humble response in that Peter does not claim to*

truly love Jesus, but only to love him. Behind this translation there are two verbs for love, truly love (agapao) and love (phileo). In the past it was common to find a great distinction between these two words, but in recent years the idea that they are close synonyms has come to prevail (for example, Carson 1991:676-77). The older idea that agapao is divine love and phileo a lower, human love does indeed go too far. For both verbs are used of the love of the Father for the Son (3:35; 5:20), and agapao can be used of false love, for example, the love of this world (2 Tim 4:10). So a simple distinction between the verbs is not justified, but this does not mean there is no distinction at all. For in this passage there is a pattern, with Jesus asking Peter twice whether he loves him (agapao) and each time Peter responding that, yes, he does love him (phileo). Then the third time Jesus switches to using Peter's word. Such a pattern suggests there is a distinction here (McKay 1985; H. C. G. Moule 1898:176), and since agapao is used more often in John for God's love than is phileo, "it was likely that agapao would be chosen for the higher meaning" (McKay 1985:322). The present context itself supports this view, for otherwise Peter would be claiming "the higher meaning" from the outset, which would not fit with his more chastened perspective. So the NIV seems justified in distinguishing these two terms in the present context. (http://www.biblegateway.com/resources/commentaries/IVP-NT/John/Jesus-Appears-Again-Disciples)

Regardless of the exact translations of love, it is clear that jesus is asking Peter not only to “love” Him in the abstract, but to demonstrate this love in caring for and tending the sheep. The fisherman was called by Jesus to a pastoral and nurturing ministry. The sheep that will be in Peter’s care are the people of the church.

The gospel of John ends with this intriguing and tantalizing statement: “Jesus did many other things as well. If every one of them were written down, I suppose that even the whole world would not have room for the books that would be written.” Several things come to mind very quickly when I medidate on these words: 1) John was very selective about what he recoded in this Gospel. As he explains in John 20:30-31: *“Jesus performed many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. But these are written that you may believe[b] that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.”* There were other “things” and signs”- but John selected these presented in his gospel for a prupose- so that we would believe. The open evangelism of this presentation should not bother us or cause us to doubt the truthfulness or historicity of the events that are recorded here; 2) I wish I had a collection of these other “things” (or signs). The Scripture is complete. Those hungry for “more” have often turned to the non canonical gospels in an attempt to “fiull in gaps” that are left by the four gospel writers. I simply conclude that whatever is not here in the canon Scripture is not necessary for righteous and joyful living through the amazing and undeserved gift of salvation: *"All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; that the man of God may be adequate--equipped for every good work."* (2 Timothy 3:16-17)

The completeness of Scripture has been expressed this way in these verses from 2 Timothy: Let's take a look at the Greek. The word "inspired" is qeovpneustos (theopneustos), and it means literally, "God breathed." This means that God was the one working through people--breathing through them his words. The Scriptures, therefore, are perfect and without error because they come from God. Paul

continues and says that these Scriptures are profitable for teaching, for proof, for correction, and for training in righteousness. In verse 17 he explains that this is so the Christian may be adequate--equipped for every good work. The word artios (artios) is defined as follows: 1) "complete, capable, proficient, able to meet all demands."; 2) "complete, perfect of its kind, suitable, exactly fitted"; 3) "complete, perfect, having reference apparently to "special aptitude for given uses." So, we see from three sources that explain the Greek that Paul is telling us that the Scriptures are "complete, capable, proficient, able to meet all demands, exactly fitted, etc." This is fine; but Paul continues to tell us that this, so we might understand that by studying the Scriptures, we will be adequately equipped for every good work.(http://carm.org/are-scriptures-sufficient).

Ezra 9-10 June 15, 2014 Acts 1

Intermarriage…a subject which in the American South was tinged with prejudice and downright hatred. Persons who crossed the "color line" in either dating or marriage were thought by some to be "traitors to their race". Some modern Jewish families, especially if they are "religious" Jews, are hesistant to let their sons and daughters marry or even date out of their religious/social group. In ancient times, one of the distinguishing featutes of God's chosen people is that they were typically careful about keeping their blood lines unbroken and unmixed. In Ezra's time this "dividing line" had been blurred, probably as an adaptation mechanism to people who wre constantly surrounded by other cultures and ethnic groups, especially in theis captivity. Ezra heard a report of how lax the observances of the separation of God's people from others had been, and it troubled and sorrowed him greatly: *"After these things had been done, the leaders came to me and said, "The people of Israel, including the priests and the Levites, have not kept themselves separate from the neighboring peoples with their detestable practices, like those of the Canaanites, Hittites, Perizzites, Jebusites, Ammonites, Moabites, Egyptians and Amorites. They have taken some of their daughters as wives for themselves and their sons, and have mingled the holy race with the peoples around them. And the leaders and officials have led the way in this unfaithfulness." When I heard this, I tore my tunic and cloak, pulled hair from my head and beard and sat down appalled. Then everyone who trembled at the words of the God of Israel gathered around me because of this unfaithfulness of the exiles. And I sat there appalled until the evening sacrifice."* (Ezra 9:1-4)

Ezra's response was to pray a heartfelt prayer to God, asking for an understanding and forgiving response to God, whose Law and rules had been so seriously breached. Ezra is heartbroken and repentant, and is humble in his approach, noting to God that he and the people have no right to even ask for forgiveness, only that God will not destroy them for their sins:

"What has happened to us is a result of our evil deeds and our great guilt, and yet, our God, you have punished us less than our sins deserved and have given us a remnant like this. Shall we then break your commands again and intermarry with the peoples who commit such detestable practices? Would you not be angry enough with us to destroy us, leaving us no remnant or survivor? Lord, the God of Israel, you are righteous! We are left this day as a remnant. Here we are before you in our guilt, though because of it not one of us can stand in your presence." (Ezra 9:13-

15). And the people join Ezra in the prayer and repentance, begging God's mercy and forgiveness: *"While Ezra was praying and confessing, weeping and throwing himself down before the house of God, a large crowd of Israelites—men, women and children—gathered around him. They too wept bitterly. Then Shekaniah son of Jehiel, one of the descendants of Elam, said to Ezra, "We have been unfaithful to our God by marrying foreign women from the peoples around us. But in spite of this, there is still hope for Israel. Now let us make a covenant before our God to send away all these women and their children, in accordance with the counsel of my lord and of those who fear the commands of our God. Let it be done according to the Law. Rise up; this matter is in your hands. We will support you, so take courage and do it."* (Ezra 10:1-4).

To the modern reader, the cure seems extreme and almost a worse sin than the original one- the wives and children from these intermarriages were to be "sent away"- and in being sent away rendered almost helpless and powerless. And yet this seemingly drastic and draconian measure was exactly what was needed. In the "big picture", God's people needed to be completely free of pagan influences- and the sooner the better. We must believe that God had compassion on these suddenly displaced family members, but His demand for justice and Law keeping was the key consideration. A proclamation was made that all heads of families that had intermarried would follow this forced separation, or else lose all their property: *"A proclamation was then issued throughout Judah and Jerusalem for all the exiles to assemble in Jerusalem. Anyone who failed to appear within three days would forfeit all his property, in accordance with the decision of the officials and elders, and would himself be expelled from the assembly of the exiles. Within the three days, all the men of Judah and Benjamin had gathered in Jerusalem. And on the twentieth day of the ninth month, all the people were sitting in the square before the house of God, greatly distressed by the occasion and because of the rain. Then Ezra the priest stood up and said to them, "You have been unfaithful; you have married foreign women, adding to Israel's guilt. Now honor the Lord, the God of your ancestors, and do his will. Separate yourselves from the peoples around you and from your foreign wives."* (Ezra 10:7-11)

A list of the priests who had intermarried and who agreed to send away wives and children, and offer a "guilt offering" are given in Ezra 10:18-44). It is not clear from the Scripture whether those not in the priesthoof also followed this procedure. It is clear that it was not only the priests who had intermarried, but also the "people" (Ezra 9:1).

Acts 1

"Wait"…a hard instruction to follow, but it was Jesus' instruction to the disciples. They clearly did not know what they were waiting for, but had come to the point of trusting Jesus for important decisions and issues. They had finally learned enough about obedience to see its value and had learned the rewards of 'waiting upon the Lord" (Isaiah 40:31, Psalm 27;14). They saw Jesus leave in dramatic fashin- he was "taken up", and they apparently spent some time staring at the place he had just left: After he said this, he was taken up before their very eyes, and a cloud hid him from their sight. 10 They were looking intently up into the sky as he was going, when suddenly two men dressed in white stood beside them. 11 "Men of Galilee,"

they said, “why do you stand here looking into the sky? This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven.” (Acts 1:9-11)

A disciple needed to be replaced, since Judas Iscariot had killed himself in re orse over what he had done to his Friend: *“ (With the payment he received for his wickedness, Judas bought a field; there he fell headlong, his body burst open and all his intestines spilled out. Everyone in Jerusalem heard about this, so they called that field in their language Akeldama, that is, Field of Blood.) “For,” said Peter, “it is written in the Book of Psalms: “‘May his place be deserted; let there be no one to dwell in it,’ and, ‘May another take his place of leadership.’”* (Acts 18-20, quoting Psalm 65:25 and 109:8). Some controversy has arisen over the “higher critics” interpretation of the manner of Judas’ death. In the Synoptic gospels, Judas is described as having hanged himself in remorse. In this account, he “fell headlong, his body burst open and all his intestines spilled out” (Acts 1:18; see also Matthew 27:5) Reference: (http://www.openbible.info/topics/judas_hanging_himself). Now we might ask ourselves if these two passages are contradictory. They certainly might seem to be on the surface. And yet, if we examine the passages more carefully, we discover that Matthew describes the MEANS of death (hanging) and Acts the RESULT. It is not unheard of medically for a body to split open after hanging, particularly if the body “fall” from the place aof hanging and strikes the ground. This was almost certainly the case here. Please see also: (http://www.tektonics.org/gk/judasdeath.php).

Judas’ hanging, by Julius Schnorr von Carolsfeld

Nehemiah 1-3 June 16, 2014 Acts 2:1-13

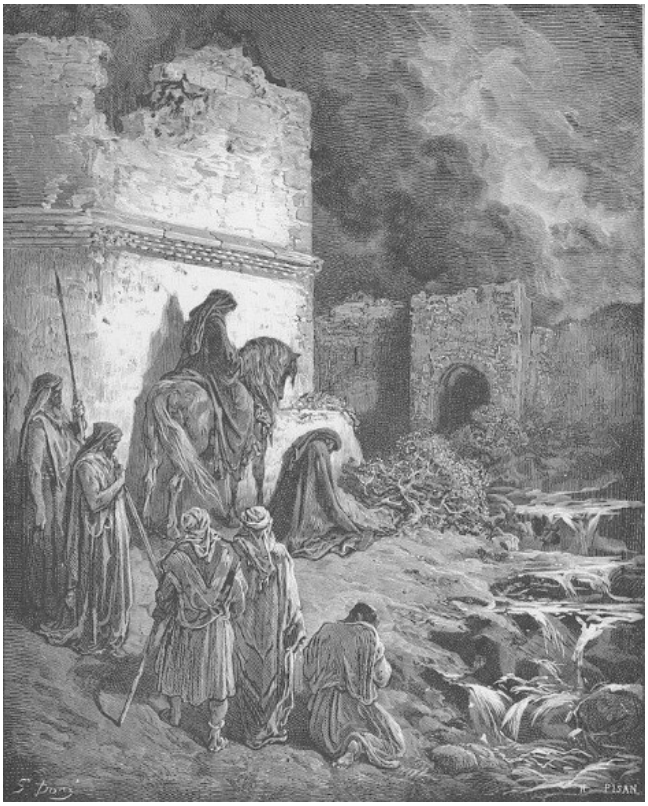
Prayer- honest, soul searching and listening prayer- should precede all important actions and decisions. Nehemiah, cupbearer to the king, had just heard devastating news about the condition of the walls and gatea in Jerusalem, as told to Nehemiah by his brother Hannia: *“They said to me, “Those who survived the exile and are back in the province are in great trouble and disgrace. The wall of Jerusalem is broken down, and its gates have been burned with fire.”* (Neh. 1:3). And so, instead of simply mourning, or even fasting, Nehemiah prayed an earnest prayer to God

that he might somehow be part of the restoration: *When I heard these things, I sat down and wept. For some days I mourned and fasted and prayed before the God of heaven. Then I said: "Lord, the God of heaven, the great and awesome God, who keeps his covenant of love with those who love him and keep his commandments, let your ear be attentive and your eyes open to hear the prayer your servant is praying before you day and night for your servants, the people of Israel. I confess the sins we Israelites, including myself and my father's family, have committed against you. We have acted very wickedly toward you. We have not obeyed the commands, decrees and laws you gave your servant Moses. "Remember the instruction you gave your servant Moses, saying, 'If you are unfaithful, I will scatter you among the nations, but if you return to me and obey my commands, then even if your exiled people are at the farthest horizon, I will gather them from there and bring them to the place I have chosen as a dwelling for my Name.' "They are your servants and your people, whom you redeemed by your great strength and your mighty hand. Lord, let your ear be attentive to the prayer of this your servant and to the prayer of your servants who delight in revering your name. Give your servant success today by granting him favor in the presence of this man."* (Neh. 1:4-11). Notice how humble and practical this prayer is- Nehemiah freely admits to God that the people are deserving of the punishment they have received, yet he simply and plaintively asks for mercy. The prayr is also practica- Nehemiah knew that he could only be of help if his "boss" gave him time away from his duties, so he prayerd that he might find favor.

Nehemiah then goes about his duties, but cannot hide the grief and pain he is feeling. The king, who must have known Nehemiah well, asked him about his sorrowful mood: *In the month of Nisan in the twentieth year of King Artaxerxes, when wine was brought for him, I took the wine and gave it to the king. I had not been sad in his presence before, so the king asked me, "Why does your face look so sad when you are not ill? This can be nothing but sadness of heart." I was very much afraid, but I said to the king, "May the king live forever! Why should my face not look sad when the city where my ancestors are buried lies in ruins, and its gates have been destroyed by fire?" The king said to me, "What is it you want?" Then I prayed to the God of heaven, and I answered the king, "If it pleases the king and if your servant has found favor in his sight, let him send me to the city in Judah where my ancestors are buried so that I can rebuild it."* (Neh. 2:1-5). I love the phrase in verse 4 "then I prayed to the God of heaven"- Nehemiah was naturally fearful- he certainly did not wish to arouse the wrath of the king, but his response was an immediate prayer! God had indeed worked a transformation in the king's heart, and he granted Nehemiah his request, as well as giving him letters of passage and protection. Inevitable, when one courageously stands up for God and follows His will, there is opposition: "When Sanballat the Horonite and Tobiah the Ammonite official heard about this, they were very much disturbed that someone had come to promote the welfare of the Israelites." (Neh. 2:10) The opposition, however, did not prevent Nehemiah from conducting his mission of restoration.

Nehemiah then inspects the walls and gates, and finds them in disrepair. Drawing on the positive result with the king and the witness that it gave Nehemiah, he challended his people to rebuild: "*Then I said to them, "You see the trouble we are in: Jerusalem lies in ruins, and its gates have been burned with fire. Come, let us rebuild the wall of Jerusalem, and we will no longer be in disgrace." I also told them*

about the gracious hand of my God on me and what the king had said to me. They replied, "Let us start rebuilding." So they began this good work." (Neh. 2:17-18). It was no accident that God had shown His power to Nehemiah- it served not only as a winess and encouragement to him, but also as an inspiration to the people.



Gustave Doré, Nehemiah Views the Ruins of Jerusalem's Walls, 1866

Remember the "enemies" who were not please with Nehemiah's plan? They show up on the scene and ridicule the plan and suggest that Nehemiah is leading a "revolt" against the king. Clearly this is not the case, but the enemies of Israel have used such "excuses" many times in history to oppose and increase in the power and influence of the Jewish nation. *"But when Sanballat the Horonite, Tobiah the Ammonite official and Geshem the Arab heard about it, they mocked and ridiculed us. "What is this you are doing?" they asked. "Are you rebelling against the king?" I answered them by saying, "The God of heaven will give us success. We his servants will start rebuilding, but as for you, you have no share in Jerusalem or any claim or historic right to it."* (Neh. 2:19-20). Notice Nehemiah's great confidence- "the God of heaven will give us success"!

Then the building and repair began in earnest: 1) the Sheep Gate; 2) the Fish Gate; 3) the Jeshana (Old) Gate; 4) the Valley gate; 5) the Dung Gate; 6) the Fountain gate; and lastly 7) the Horse Gate were all repaired and the doors re-hung. (Neh. 3:1-32).

Acts 2:1-13

Power! That's what we as individulas need, that's what the church needs. Power to do the work, power to undergird the work with prayer, power to witness effectively and winningly, power to change the world, one heart at a time. In my humble view, there are two "hinge events" in history- both within a very short time span. The first was Jesus' prayer in the Garden right before His arrest- "Not my will, but yours!" The second was the filling of the disciples and others in the fellowship with the Holy Spirit. In the Hebrew Scriptures, the filling of the Spirit was occasional and for a limited puropose with a specific individual. But now, after Pentecost, the literal "floodgates" are open, and all believers have access to the transforming power of God's Holy Spirit!

Jesus had told His followers to gather in Jerusalem amd "wait"- a difficult task for me sometimes. We knowthere is powr in "waiting on the Lord" (Isaiah 40:32, Psam 27:14) but we are sometimes impatient and demanding. And yet when we do wait and find power waiting for us- we are amazed that we couldn't see the value of "waiting".

The Scripture tells us the story this way: *"When the day of Pentecost came, they were all together in one place. Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting. They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of*

them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them." (Acts 2:1-4). Right away, I want to tackle what I feel is a misunderstanding and misinterpretation of Acts 2:4. Some Christians are categorized by me (always a dangerous exercise!) as "2X4" Christians. These folks believe that every REAL, SPIRIT FILLED Christian has the gift of tongues. This is not accurate Scripturally, and is not a necessary manifestation of the filling of the Spirit. Certainly some Christians do have the "gift of tongues", but we must examine closely the purpose of this manifestation and gift in the contect of the Pentecost event itself. The "other tongues" were known languages (not known by the speakers) and these speakers were praising and testifying to God's awesome power and strength (Acts 2:8). Again, it's not about the speaker, it's about God. In this event, God wanted to be sure that ALL presnt heard the truth- in their own language. Certainly there is a "prayer language" that may or may not be a known language, and certainly there are those who manifest the Spririt- then and now- by this gift. But as Paul points out later, this "speaking" must be interpreted, or else the worship of God is not "in order" (1 Cor. 14:26-33). For a scholarly look at "glossolalia" and "xenoglossia", please see (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Glossolalia). For a much expande discussion of the place of speaking in tongues in the church, please see (http://www.gloriouschurch.com/html/speaking-in-tongues-in-the-church.asp).

There are many gifts of the Spiriti (1 Cor. 12) Paul makes it clear in the chapter of his letter to the church in Corinth that there is a diversity of gifts, given to various believers for the building up of the church- not to its division. In fact Paul spends a large part of the writing encouraging unity (1 Cor. 12:12-30). My prayer is that we, the church, would joyfully receive the gifts our Maker gives us, and that we could celebrate the beautiful diversity of these giftf within the unity of the church!

And, then and now, there are always distractors and disbelievers to any manifestation of God among His people: *"Some, however, made fun of them and said, "They have had too much wine."* (Acts 2:13)

Nehemiah 4-6 June 17, 2014 Acts 2:14-47

Challenges- how do we face them? Are we leaders who encourage our followers to meet the challenge "head on" and trust God? Do we faer failure and try to avoid a challenge? MY personal challenges in everyday life would seem trivial to some, but they are real to me. How do I show my faith when faced with an "everyday" or a "big" challenge? We reveal a lot about our faith and trust in the crucible of meeting challenges. Nehemiah was no different. The "two enemies" Sanballat and Tobiah, may be symbolic to us but they were real enough to Nehemiah and the people of God- and their opposition was real and ongoing: *"But when Sanballat, Tobiah, the Arabs, the Ammonites and the people of Ashdod heard that the repairs to Jerusalem's walls had gone ahead and that the gaps were being closed, they were very angry. They all plotted together to come and fight against Jerusalem and stir up trouble against it. But we prayed to our God and posted a guard day and night to meet this threat."* (Neh. 4:7-9). Notice that God's people did two very important things to respond to this threat: 1) they first prayed to God; and 2) they posted a guard. A very spiritual and practical response!

The work of reparing, restoring and rebuilding went on. Nehemiah was wise and split the workers into two groups- one to build and another to guard: *"From that day on, half of my men did the work, while the other half were equipped with spears, shields, bows and armor. The officers posted themselves behind all the people of Judah who were building the wall. Those who carried materials did their work with one hand and held a weapon in the other, and each of the builders wore his sword at his side as he worked. But the man who sounded the trumpet stayed with me. 19 Then I said to the nobles, the officials and the rest of the people, "The work is extensive and spread out, and we are widely separated from each other along the wall. Wherever you hear the sound of the trumpet, join us there. Our God will fight for us!"* (Neh. 4:16-20) Notice in verse 20 that the faith and trust in God was evident- "Our God will fight for us"!

There were pproblems within the walls, as there always are- some of the "nobles" were charging interest to their own people and impoverishing them. This was clearly prohibited by the Law (Exodus 22:25). But even though this practice was "unlawful" it was still going on- and Nehemiah showed both his leadership and his godliness by putting an end to this practice. *"So I continued, "What you are doing is not right. Shouldn't you walk in the fear of our God to avoid the reproach of our Gentile enemies? I and my brothers and my men are also lending the people money and grain. But let us stop charging interest! Give back to them immediately their fields, vineyards, olive groves and houses, and also the interest you are charging them—one percent of the money, grain, new wine and olive oil."* (Neh. 5:9-11) Nehemiah also showed his leadership and concern for the people by regularly feeding them from the allowance given him by king Artaxerxes: *"Furthermore, a hundred and fifty Jews and officials ate at my table, as well as those who came to us from the surrounding nations. Each day one ox, six choice sheep and some poultry were prepared for me, and every ten days an abundant supply of wine of all kinds. In spite of all this, I never demanded the food allotted to the governor, because the demands were heavy on these people. Remember me with favor, my God, for all I have done for these people."* (Neh. 5:17-19)

The opposition from the enemies of Nehemiah, the project and the people continued. This opposition took two fros- diversion and slander. The enemies of God's people proposed that Nehemiah meet with them at Ono- a diversion, and the enemies also tried a campaign of slander and misinformation- reporting that the Jews were plotting against the king and would revolt. But God protected his people- and Nehemiah- as He always does: *"When word came to Sanballat, Tobiah, Geshem the Arab and the rest of our enemies that I had rebuilt the wall and not a gap was left in it—though up to that time I had not set the doors in the gates — Sanballat and Geshem sent me this message: "Come, let us meet together in one of the villages[1] on the plain of Ono." But they were scheming to harm me; so I sent messengers to them with this reply: "I am carrying on a great project and cannot go down. Why should the work stop while I leave it and go down to you?" Four times they sent me the same message, and each time I gave them the same answer. Then, the fifth time, Sanballat sent his aide to me with the same message, and in his hand was an unsealed letter in which was written: "It is reported among the nations—and Geshem says it is true—that you and the Jews are plotting to revolt, and therefore you are building the wall. Moreover, according to these reports you are about to become their king and have even appointed prophets to make this*

proclamation about you in Jerusalem: 'There is a king in Judah!' Now this report will get back to the king; so come, let us meet together." I sent him this reply: "Nothing like what you are saying is happening; you are just making it up out of your head." They were all trying to frighten us, thinking, "Their hands will get too weak for the work, and it will not be completed." But I prayed, "Now strengthen my hands." (Neh. 6:1-9) And Nehemiah prayed as we should- Lord strengthen my hands (Verse 9).

When God's people respond to His call, act in obedience and courage, and depend on Him for strength and guidance- they prevail! One of the crowning verses in the book of Nehemiah is this: "So the wall was completed on the twenty-fifth of Elul, in fifty-two days." (Neh. 6:15) Despite opposition, despite problems "within the walls", despite everything- God's purpose was accomplished through His people! And the work was an impressive tribute to God, both to His people and His enemies: *"When all our enemies heard about this, all the surrounding nations were afraid and lost their self-confidence, because they realized that this work had been done with the help of our God."* (Neh. 6:16)

Acts 2:14-47

Joel was given a vision of what would transpire when God's people received a full measure of God's Spirit-it was a glorious vision that held hope to the people, and was finally brought to fruition in the day of Pemtecost- whrn the Spirit filled God's people in an exciting and unexpected way. God truly si the God of promise, power, and surprises- wonderful serendipity! As Peter explained to the "scoffers" who though the Spirit filled belivers were simply drunk: *"Then Peter stood up with the Eleven, raised his voice and addressed the crowd: "Fellow Jews and all of you who live in Jerusalem, let me explain this to you; listen carefully to what I say. 15 These people are not drunk, as you suppose. It's only nine in the morning! 16 No, this is what was spoken by the prophet Joel:*

"'In the last days, God says,
I will pour out my Spirit on all people.
Your sons and daughters will prophesy,
your young men will see visions,
your old men will dream dreams.
Even on my servants, both men and women,
I will pour out my Spirit in those days,
and they will prophesy.
I will show wonders in the heavens above
and signs on the earth below,
blood and fire and billows of smoke.
The sun will be turned to darkness
and the moon to blood
before the coming of the great and glorious day of the Lord.
And everyone who calls
on the name of the Lord will be saved." (Acts 2:14-21, quoting Joel 2:28-32)

The Peter, certainly not schooled or trained, goes on to give a magnificanr speech about Jesus, testifying that this One was prophesied in the Scriptures, and that He was the culmination of God's plan for the salvation of His people- He is the Lord! (Acts 2:25-28; 34,35). The climaxing statement, the capstone of this proclamation is verse 36: "Therefore let all Israel be assured of this: God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Messiah."

Abd this- and all evangelistic proclamations- requires a response- and this case was no different: *"When the people heard this, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and the other apostles, "Brothers, what shall we do?" Peter replied, "Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off—for all whom the Lord our God will call." With many other words he warned them; and he pleaded with them, "Save yourselves from this corrupt generation." Those who accepted his message were baptized, and about three thousand were added to their number that day."* (Acts 2:37-41). Notice that bold evangelism bore fruit, as "three thousand" were added to the number of believers that day.

And the believers lived together, shared all they had, and spent time in praise and prayer. The magnetism of this kind of fellowship drew men, women and children out of the "ordinary" lives and into the fellowship- a fellowship like unto heaven:

"They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Everyone was filled with awe at the many wonders and signs performed by the apostles. All the believers were together and had everything in common. They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need. Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved." (Acts 2:42-47). This kind of fellowship has been practiced in the modern era, one notable example is the Koinonia Farm in Americus, Georgia led by Millard Fuller, founder of Habitate for Humanity (http://www.habitat.org/how/millard.aspx).

Nehemiah 7-8 June 18, 2014 Acts 3

And now the building and rebuiolding was complete. Thew walls of Jerusalem were restored and the gates rebuilt and re-hung. This was a great victory for God's people, and a striking and unmistakeable testimony to the power of God. Instructions were given thet the doors were to be opened only at intervals and with guards in place: *"I said to them, "The gates of Jerusalem are not to be opened until the sun is hot. While the gatekeepers are still on duty, have them shut the doors and bar them. Also appoint residents of Jerusalem as guards, some at their posts and some near their own houses."* (Neh. 7:3). The area inside the rebuilt city walls was spacious, and there were relatively few inhabitants. Houses had not been built or rebuilt. Nehemiah was led by the Lord to enumerate those exiles that had returned, listing them by family. The totals were listred as follows: *"The whole company numbered 42,360, besides their 7,337 male and female slaves; and they*

also had 245 male and female singers. There were 736 horses, 245 mules, 69, 435 camels and 6,720 donkeys." (Neh. 7:66-68).

The climactic event of that time opf rebuilding was the reading of the Law. In a scene reminiscent of Josiah's reading the Law after it had been lost for years(2 Kings 23), Ezra read the Law aloud to the gathered people: *"When the seventh month came and the Israelites had settled in their towns, all the people came together as one in the square before the Water Gate. They told Ezra the teacher of the Law to bring out the Book of the Law of Moses, which the Lord had commanded for Israel. So on the first day of the seventh month Ezra the priest brought the Law before the assembly, which was made up of men and women and all who were able to understand. He read it aloud from daybreak till noon as he faced the square before the Water Gate in the presence of the men, women and others who could understand. And all the people listened attentively to the Book of the Law. Ezra the teacher of the Law stood on a high wooden platform built for the occasion. Beside him on his right stood Mattithiah, Shema, Anaiah, Uriah, Hilkiah and Maaseiah; and on his left were Pedaiah, Mishael, Malkijah, Hashum, Hashbaddanah, Zechariah and Meshullam. Ezra opened the book. All the people could see him because he was standing above them; and as he opened it, the people all stood up. Ezra praised the Lord, the great God; and all the people lifted their hands and responded, "Amen! Amen!" Then they bowed down and worshiped the Lord with their faces to the ground."* (Neh 8:1-6) Several things are noteworthy in this event: 1) all the Law was read, and it was received and acclaimed by the people, who listened "attentively"; 2) the law was read by the priest- as God's representative- and the reading wqas clearly an act of worship; 3) the people's attitude was of both worship and repentance- the popwer of God's word was evident from their reaction- they "bowed down and worshipped the Lord with their faces to the ground".

And though the people shed tears of repentance, the event was a joyful one as the people reflected on the words of Scripture that testified to the great goodness of their God of the universe: *"Then Nehemiah the governor, Ezra the priest and teacher of the Law, and the Levites who were instructing the people said to them all, "This day is holy to the Lord your God. Do not mourn or weep." For all the people had been weeping as they listened to the words of the Law. Nehemiah said, "Go and enjoy choice food and sweet drinks, and send some to those who have nothing prepared. This day is holy to our Lord. Do not grieve, for the joy of the Lord is your strength." The Levites calmed all the people, saying, "Be still, for this is a holy day. Do not grieve." Then all the people went away to eat and drink, to send portions of food and to celebrate with great joy, because they now understood the words that had been made known to them."* (Neh 8:9-12). And truly, the "Joy of the Lord" was their strength, as it is our strength today! The Festival of Booths, a remembrance of the times of wandering in the wilderness, had not been celebrated in many years. The people, having heard the description and details of this observance, followed the prescribed activities, gathered branches and celebrated this feastival: "So the people went out and brought back branches and built themselves temporary shelters on their own roofs, in their courtyards, in the courts of the house of God and in the square by the Water Gate and the one by the Gate of Ephraim. 17 The whole company that had returned from exile built temporary shelters and lived in them. From the days of Joshua son of Nun until that day, the Israelites had not celebrated it like this. And their joy was very great. Day after day,

from the first day to the last, Ezra read from the Book of the Law of God. They celebrated the festival for seven days, and on the eighth day, in accordance with the regulation, there was an assembly." (Neh 8:16-18) According to Wikipedia: "The sukkah is intended as a reminiscence of the type of fragile dwellings in which the Israelites dwelt during their 40 years of travel in the desert after the Exodus from slavery in Egypt. Throughout the holiday, meals are eaten inside the sukkah and some people sleep there as well. On each day of the holiday, members of the household recite a blessing over the lulav (closed frond of the date palm tree, bound with boughs and branches of the willow and myrtle trees) and etrog (yellow citron)." (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sukkot).

Acts 3

The power of the Spirit was now unleased among Jesus' followers, and they began to do the "works" that Jesus had done- preaching, teaching, and healing. One such instance is recorded in Acts 3, in which Simon Peter heals a beggar. The unsuspecting beggar was simply asking for money, or "spare change" as some modern beggars might describe it. The response from Peter ws surprisong and powerful: *"One day Peter and John were going up to the temple at the time of prayer—at three in the afternoon. Now a man who was lame from birth was being carried to the temple gate called Beautiful, where he was put every day to beg from those going into the temple courts. When he saw Peter and John about to enter, he asked them for money. Peter looked straight at him, as did John. Then Peter said, "Look at us!" So the man gave them his attention, expecting to get something from them. Then Peter said, "Silver or gold I do not have, but what I do have I give you. In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, walk." Taking him by the right hand, he helped him up, and instantly the man's feet and ankles became strong. He jumped to his feet and began to walk. Then he went with them into the temple courts, walking and jumping, and praising God."* (Acts 3:1-8) They didn't have the "currency" the beggar asked for, money that would perhaps help him through the day to face still another day of begging. Instead the beggar was given the unexpected and miraculous gift of healing. Once freed f his debilitating condition, the beggar could become a "former beggar". This act was done, not to bring famel and glory to Peter and John, but to clearly show the power and healing that comes through God's very Spirit. Miracles- true miracles- are always done with this goal- to magnify and glorify God, and to draw men and women to Him.

Peter also took this opportunity to preach and teach his own people- who had rejected Jesus- about the meaning and purpose of Jesus- His life, ministry and saving sacrificial death: *"Now, fellow Israelites, I know that you acted in ignorance, as did your leaders. But this is how God fulfilled what he had foretold through all the prophets, saying that his Messiah would suffer. Repent, then, and turn to God, so that your sins may be wiped out, that times of refreshing may come from the Lord, and that he may send the Messiah, who has been appointed for you—even Jesus. Heaven must receive him until the time comes for God to restore everything, as he promised long ago through his holy prophets. For Moses said, 'The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your own people; you must listen to everything he tells you. Anyone who does not listen to him will be completely cut off from their people.'* (Acts 3:17-23). Even though this was a critical and harsh

message that condemned the ignorance and willfulness of the Israelites, it was received in the context of a clear "sign" from God Himself, and thus the miracle served as a backdrop and context for a presentation of the gospel. God always finds a way for the Message to be proclaimed in a powerful and effective way- we must sieze the moment as the Spirit nudges us to speak!

Nehemiah 9-11 June 19, 2014 Acts 4:1-22

Confession and repentance are necessary for spiritual growth and maturity. The people of Isral, having heard the Law- responded in several significant ways: 1) repentance and mourning; 2) confession of sin- theirs as well as those ancestors before them; and 3) praise and worship of God- giving thanks to Him for His mercy and forbearance. The people separated themselves from "foreigners"- showing their desire to be a separate, holy and called people, and gave their loud responses to what they had just heard in God's Word: *"On the twenty-fourth day of the same month, the Israelites gathered together, fasting and wearing sackcloth and putting dust on their heads. Those of Israelite descent had separated themselves from all foreigners. They stood in their places and confessed their sins and the sins of their ancestors. They stood where they were and read from the Book of the Law of the Lord their God for a quarter of the day, and spent another quarter in confession and in worshiping the Lord their God. Standing on the stairs of the Levites were Jeshua, Bani, Kadmiel, Shebaniah, Bunni, Sherebiah, Bani and Kenani. They cried out with loud voices to the Lord their God."* (Neh. 9:1-4) God is seen as a God of "great compassion" who cares for and nurtures His people: "Because of your great compassion you did not abandon them in the wilderness. By day the pillar of cloud did not fail to guide them on their path, nor the pillar of fire by night to shine on the way they were to take." (Neh 9:19). The prayer ends with a sad note- the people are in slavery in a land that once belonged to them- and the reason is their constant disobedience to God. The plaintive tone of this prayer suggests that the people are begging God for forgiveness and restoration to their former place of honor and favor: *"But see, we are slaves today, slaves in the land you gave our ancestors so they could eat its fruit and the other good things it produces. Because of our sins, its abundant harvest goes to the kings you have placed over us. They rule over our bodies and our cattle as they please. We are in great distress."* (Neh. 9:36-37)

In order to present God with evidence of their sincerity in seeking His favor, the people signed a binding agreement with their God, and Nehemiah 10 is a catalogue of those signing and attesting their constant compliance with God's Law. Among those signing were priests (Neh. 10:9-13); the leaders of the people- including Nehemiah (Neh. 10:1-8; 14-27), and the "rest of the people" (Neh. 10:28). One of the most significant signed promises was the agreement to tithe as well as continue to maintain the Temple (Neh. 10:37-39). Nehemiah 11 consist of a list of the persons living in the newly restored city of Jerusalem and surrounding towns. Those who were to live in Jerusalem were selected by lot: *"Now the leaders of the people settled in Jerusalem. The rest of the people cast lots to bring one out of every ten of them to live in Jerusalem, the holy city, while the remaining nine were to stay in their own towns. The people commended all who volunteered to live in Jerusalem."* (Neh. 11:1-2)

Acts 4:1-22

The disciples were given an incredibly precious gift- the Holy Spirit- and were promised tht the Spirit would give them “words to say”- not only to those who would hear the message of Good News but also to those who opposed the Messsage. (Matthew 10:19; Luke 12:12; 21:15) This promise was fulfilled when the Sanhedrin opposed Peter and John and arrested them. It is an interesting detail to me that these men were arrested ‘at night”, parallel with the arrest of their master Jesus, also at night. Despite these efforts, those who heard were convinced of the truth and life saving nature of the brave teaching of these two men: *“But many who heard the message believed; so the number of men who believed grew to about five thousand.”* (Acts 4:4). Despite what men may do, God rules and overrules!

Then we have recorded a speech by these two untained, unlettered men who simply allowed the Spirit to speak through them: *“Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said to them: “Rulers and elders of the people! If we are being called to account today for an act of kindness shown to a man who was lame and are being asked how he was healed, then know this, you and all the people of Israel: It is by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified but whom God raised from the dead, that this man stands before you healed. Jesus is*

“‘the stone you builders rejected,
which has become the cornerstone.’

Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to mankind by which we must be saved.” When they saw the courage of Peter and John and realized that they were unschooled, ordinary men, they were astonished and they took note that these men had been with Jesus.” (Acts 4:8-13, quoting Psalm 118:22)

When faced with this brave testimony, and the presence of the beggar they had just healed, the Sanhedrin could only forbid these men from testifying and preaching again to others. It is clear that the Sanhedrin was fearful of the power and convincing and saving message that these wo men were faithfully delivering. They plotted and threatened, but could do no more. The world changing power of the Holy Spirit had been unleashed, and no power on earth could now contain it: *“So they ordered them to withdraw from the Sanhedrin and then conferred together. “What are we going to do with these men?” they asked. “Everyone living in Jerusalem knows they have performed a notable sign, and we cannot deny it. But to stop this thing from spreading any further among the people, we must warn them to speak no longer to anyone in this name.” Then they called them in again and commanded them not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus. But Peter and John replied, “Which is right in God’s eyes: to listen to you, or to him? You be the judges! As for us, we cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard.” After further threats they let them go. They could not decide how to punish them, because all the people were praising God for what had happened.”* (Acts 4:15-21). The persons who had been filled with the Spirit were compelled to speak- “we cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard”.

Nehemiah 12-13 June 20, 2014 Acts 4:23-37

One of the important historical featurs of the repatriation of Judah and Jerusalem was the return of the Levites and priests. The names of those returning are listed in Nehemiah 12 (Neh 12:1-25). On arrival in Jerusalem, Nehemiah arranged for these returning priests and Levites to participate in the joyful rededication of the walls. Although this was a joyful ad festive occasion, it is important to realize that the true security of God's people was not to be found in walls, gates or fortifications. The real strength of Israel is in the power, provision and goodness of the Lord! Several choirs were placed on the top of the walls, presumably so that their voices could be heard more clearly and by more people: *"I had the leaders of Judah go up on top of[e] the wall. I also assigned two large choirs to give thanks. One was to proceed on top of the wall to the right, toward the Dung Gate."* (Neh. 12:31). Persons were assigned to care for the storehouses where the tithes of grain, fruit and other produce of the land were collected: *"At that time men were appointed to be in charge of the storerooms for the contributions, firstfruits and tithes. From the fields around the towns they were to bring into the storerooms the portions required by the Law for the priests and the Levites, for Judah was pleased with the ministering priests and Levites. They performed the service of their God and the service of purification, as did also the musicians and gatekeepers, according to the commands of David and his son Solomon."* (Neh. 12:44-45).

The reforms in re-establishing true worship and order in the land were not complete. In chapter 13, Nehemiah outlines the reforms that he undertook to complete the (partial) restoration of Judah: 1) according to the Law, all Ammonites and Moabites were excluded from fellowship and worship (Neh. 13:1-2); 2) Tobiah was relieved of his duties as storehouse manager (Neh. 13:4-9); 3) the portion to be allocated to the Levites was restored (Neh. 13:10-14); 4) the strict observance of the Sabbath, including prohibition of all "work" was made as a standard of behavior (Neh. 13:15-22); and 5) intermarriage with other pagan cultures, such as that of the Ammonites, Moabites, and those from Ashdod was punished and strict prohibitions against further intermarriage was made (Neh. 13:23-29). After listing each of these reforms, Nehemiah prays and asks God for forbearance and forgiveness: *"Remember me for this, my God, and do not blot out what I have so faithfully done for the house of my God and its services."* (Neh 13:14); *"Remember me for this also, my God, and show mercy to me according to your great love."* (Neh. 13:22b); *"Remember me with favor, my God."* (Neh. 13:31b) Clearly Nehemiah's desire was that the wonderful and faithful God of the universe would remember his efforts and be forgiving and loving to Nehemiah, for whom retoring the land and his people had been a consuming passion.

Acts 4:23-47

Whenever the Holy Spirit moves in the hearts of believers, several things are inevitable- first, and positively, great and powerful events occur that are a testimony to the power, love and magnificence of God. There is a negative consequence as well- men who "hate the light" (John 3:19-20) are galvanized into opposition to the movement of God's Spirit, and do what they can to remove this

"searchlight" from their lives. It was no different in the early church. The Spirit had given wise and compelling words to Peter and John as they bravely testified to the Sanhedrin, and the enemies of God's work and Spirit tried every possible means at their disposal to quench this unquenchable light and power: *"On their release, Peter and John went back to their own people and reported all that the chief priests and the elders had said to them. When they heard this, they raised their voices together in prayer to God. "Sovereign Lord," they said, "you made the heavens and the earth and the sea, and everything in them. You spoke by the Holy Spirit through the mouth of your servant, our father David:*

"'Why do the nations rage
and the peoples plot in vain?
The kings of the earth rise up
and the rulers band together
against the Lord
and against his anointed one.

Indeed Herod and Pontius Pilate met together with the Gentiles and the people of Israel in this city to conspire against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed. They did what your power and will had decided beforehand should happen. Now, Lord, consider their threats and enable your servants to speak your word with great boldness. Stretch out your hand to heal and perform signs and wonders through the name of your holy servant Jesus." (Acts 4:23-30 quoting Psalm 2:1-2). Notice that the disciples did not pray that the opposition cease, but that they might be empowered all the more to *"speak your word with great boldness"*! They expected God to act- and to perform "signs and wonders"!

God answered their prayer- and the place they were in was "shaken". This "shaking" appears in may other places in Scripture as a sign and testimony of the overwhelming power of God (http://bible.knowing-jesus.com/topics/Shaking). *"After they prayed, the place where they were meeting was shaken. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God boldly."* (Acts 4:31)

The disciples were in unity, a model for the modern church. They were of one mind about the things that really mattered, and the things they did not agree on unltimately were of lesser importance: *"All the believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of their possessions was their own, but they shared everything they had. With great power the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus. And God's grace was so powerfully at work in them all that there were no needy persons among them. For from time to time those who owned land or houses sold them, brought the money from the sales and put it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to anyone who had need."* (Acts 4:32-35). Some have criticized this model of living as communistic, and in the strictest sense of the word "communistic"- living in a commune, they are right. This community of believers in no other way resembles the modern ideology of communism, in which the state is "god". The distribution of wealth as seen here is done out of love and compassion and not from any sense of obligation or entitlement.

Esther 1-3 June 21, 2014 Acts 5:1-16

The story of Esther is one that reminds us of the humanity and frailty of all believers. We live in a world that is filled with secular powers that must be dealth with- either as threats or allies. In the ancient world, the will of the king- the ruler- was a force to be reckoned with. Women did not have as many "rights" as now, although a clever and intelligent woman could find her way and prosper. When Queen Vashti refused to see the king and his guests, she took and enormous risk. It is certainly not obvious why she did not answer the call to "appear" before the king. She may have enjoyed a positon of privilege and favor with the King- but she certainly spent all her political capital on her stubborn refusal to obey the king's command/wish! In order to save face, Vashti was removed from the office of Queen, and a replacement was sought: *""Therefore, if it pleases the king, let him issue a royal decree and let it be written in the laws of Persia and Media, which cannot be repealed, that Vashti is never again to enter the presence of King Xerxes. Also let the king give her royal position to someone else who is better than she. Then when the king's edict is proclaimed throughout all his vast realm, all the women will respect their husbands, from the least to the greatest."* (Esther 1:19-20). The issue was at least in part that failing to remove the Queen would set a bad example to the other women in King Xerxes' kingdom- so a replacement was sought for the Queen. At least he did not order her executed!

Here is an example of what some would call "luck" but persons of faith would call intervention, since the selection of candidates for the position of Queen was given to Hegai (Esther 2:8) who assembled many young women for ultimate selection as queen. God was overseeing her treatmnent and advice to Esther, so that at the end of the regimen Esther would be a clear favorite for the King to select. Mordecai, a Jew from the tribe of Benjamin, arranged for his cousin Esther (also called Hadassah) to be included. Esther was instructed not to reveal that she was also a Jew, presumably since there was at least some prejudice against Jews at that time. Esther carefully followed her instructions as to "beauty tratments" and was successful in impressing the King: *"Now the king was attracted to Esther more than to any of the other women, and she won his favor and approval more than any of the other virgins. So he set a royal crown on her head and made her queen instead of Vashti. And the king gave a great banquet, Esther's banquet, for all his nobles and officials. He proclaimed a holiday throughout the provinces and distributed gifts with royal liberality."* (Esther 2:17-18)

Esther was not given her position as Queen as a "reward" or for her own glory, although some may interpret the story of her ascent that way. She was put into the position of Queen for the express purpose of saving her prople from the evil plots of Haman, a trusted advisor to the king. Mordecai was also the beneficiary of God's intervention, as he was able to discover a plot to assassinate the King, and successfully thwarted the attempt. His stature increased after this display of loyalty to the king: *"During the time Mordecai was sitting at the king's gate, Bigthana and Teresh, two of the king's officers who guarded the doorway, became angry and conspired to assassinate King Xerxes. But Mordecai found out about the plot and told Queen Esther, who in turn reported it to the king, giving credit to Mordecai. And when the report was investigated and found to be true, the two officials were impaled on poles. All this was recorded in the book of the annals in the presence of the king."* (Esther 2:21-23)

Haman had been given a high honor, and many of the other nobles would bow down to him- but Mordecai would not. As a God fearing Jew, he was only willing to bow to his Maker, and not to men. This "disrespectful" behavior got Mordecai unfavorable notice from Haman, who was jealous of his new found stature and influence. Haman was determined that Mordecai would not be the only person he would try to destroy, but that all the jews in the kingdom should be eliminated as well: "When Haman saw that Mordecai would not kneel down or pay him honor, he was enraged. 6 Yet having learned who Mordecai's people were, he scorned the idea of killing only Mordecai. Instead Haman looked for a way to destroy all Mordecai's people, the Jews, throughout the whole kingdom of Xerxes." This is classic anti-Semitism, and is an unfortunately typical example of how the practices and beliefs of God's people are rejected and even hated by non-Jews. Haman constructed a powerful argument for the king with the objective of removing all Jews from the kingdom, appealing to the vanity and self-importannce of the King: *"Then Haman said to King Xerxes, "There is a certain people dispersed among the peoples in all the provinces of your kingdom who keep themselves separate. Their customs are different from those of all other people, and they do not obey the king's laws; it is not in the king's best interest to tolerate them. If it pleases the king, let a decree be issued to destroy them, and I will give ten thousand talents[f] of silver to the king's administrators for the royal treasury." So the king took his signet ring from his finger and gave it to Haman son of Hammedatha, the Agagite, the enemy of the Jews. "Keep the money," the king said to Haman, "and do with the people as you please."* (Esther 3:8-11). And following this encounter, the King published a decree that called for the complete elimination of the Jews: *"Dispatches were sent by couriers to all the king's provinces with the order to destroy, kill and annihilate all the Jews—young and old, women and children—on a single day, the thirteenth day of the twelfth month, the month of Adar, and to plunder their goods. 14 A copy of the text of the edict was to be issued as law in every province and made known to the people of every nationality so they would be ready for that day."* (Esther 3:13-14) Without a dramatic and timely intervention, the slaughter of the Jews in Xerxes' kingdom was all but certain!

Acts 5:1-16

Incomplete obedience is the same as disobedience. This is a very difficult precept to absorb, much less to live by. The number of times I can truthfully sy I have been completely obedient to God are unfortunately very few. The wonder of it all is that: 1) God forgives us and understands how we are "prone to wander"; 2) God rules and overrules when we "fall short"; and 3) that God uses our disobedience to teach us how to be more (and hopefully, eventually fully) obedient. Such is the story of Annanias and Sapphira. There was nothing fundamentally wrong with selling property and giving the proceeds to the church family. The problem here was that of deception and greed. Instead of giving all the proceeds to the church family, some of the money was "held back". The story goes this way*:" Now a man named Ananias, together with his wife Sapphira, also sold a piece of property. With his wife's full knowledge he kept back part of the money for himself, but brought the rest and put it at the apostles' feet. Then Peter said, "Ananias, how is it that Satan has so filled your heart that you have lied to the Holy Spirit and have kept for yourself some of the money you received for the land? Didn't it belong to you before it was sold? And after it was sold, wasn't the money at your disposal? What*

made you think of doing such a thing? You have not lied just to human beings but to God." (Acts 5:1-4) Notice that the "lie" was not just to the church but to God.

Then a truly amazing thing happens- actually two very similar and amazing things happen. When confronted with the deception and greed of this act, Annanias "fell down and died". Soon after, when offered the opportunity to tell the truth about the sale of the property, the wife lied also, and then she "fell down at his (her husband's) feet and died" (Acts 5:5,10). The Scripture notes that: *"Great fear seized the whole church and all who heard about these events."* (Acts 5:11). Modern readers may share the fear, dread and amazement of the seemingly disproportional outcome- death- to what we may see as a moderately destructive sin- lying and greed. Aren't we all greedy from time to time…? Do we always represent the truth completely and without any self-serving deception? The commentary is helpful here (http://www.biblegateway.com/resources/commentaries/IVP-NT/Acts/Negative-Example-Ananias) *"So Ananias and Sapphira learn that in this life God can, and when he chooses will, punish sinners either by immediate death or by some other means. This can happen to those who claim to be, and may truly be, a part of his covenant people, enjoy his salvation blessings and yet deliberately sin and remain unrepentant (1 Cor 5:5; 1 Jn 5:16-17). For Christians today this is still a temptation: to so luxuriate in the love and grace of God that we do not take seriously the consequences of our deliberate sinning. But God will not be mocked (Gal 6:7-8).*

In a prophecy and an effective judgment, but not a curse, Peter declares that the young men who buried Sapphira's husband (the feet of points to their function as transporters of the dead) are at the door and will soon carry out another corpse--hers. Luke heightens the impact with the phrase at that moment (5:10). Thus Sapphira too experiences divine judgment by immediate death, and the believers again respond with dishonorable burial. The lack of reference to wrapping the body may reflect the Jewish custom that women could wrap both men and women, but men could wrap only men (Semahot 12:10). Great fear comes on the whole church. This is the first reference in Acts to the body of Christians as the "church" (ekklesia)."

Ananias and Sapphira hiding their money

A more positive set of events follows this disturbing story- the disciples heal "many". Healing- whether of the mind. Spirit or body, is clear evidence of the positive and transforming power of God's Holy Spirit. The Spirit, expressed through the lives and obedient hearts of the disciples, accomplished many positive things- including a dramatic increase in the number of believers. So powerful was the healing of some- especially Peter- that some felt that even the presence of his shadow had curative properties*: "As a result, people brought the sick into the streets and laid them on beds and mats so that at least Peter's shadow might fall on some of them as he passed by. Crowds gathered also from the towns around Jerusalem, bringing their sick and those tormented by impure spirits, and all of them were healed."* (Acts 5:15-16) God is so generous…they were "all healed"!

Esther 4-6 June 22, 2014 Acts 5:17-42

Now was the time for Esther to satnd up for her people! Even though it was against the law of the land for Esther to approach the king, she saw that she must do this to plead for the life of her people. Her situation was even more complicated since she had not revealed to the King that she was a Jew. Mordecai pled with Esther, explaining the dire situation God's people were in, and solicited her help: *"Hathak went back and reported to Esther what Mordecai had said. 10 Then she instructed him to say to Mordecai, "All the king's officials and the people of the royal provinces know that for any man or woman who approaches the king in the inner court without being summoned the king has but one law: that they be put to death unless the king extends the gold scepter to them and spares their lives. But thirty days have passed since I was called to go to the king." When Esther's words were reported to Mordecai, he sent back this answer: "Do not think that because you are in the king's house you alone of all the Jews will escape. For if you remain silent at this time, relief and deliverance for the Jews will arise from another place, but you and your father's family will perish. And who knows but that you have come to your royal position for such a time as this?" Then Esther sent this reply to Mordecai: "Go,*

gather together all the Jews who are in Susa, and fast for me. Do not eat or drink for three days, night or day. I and my attendants will fast as you do. When this is done, I will go to the king, even though it is against the law. And if I perish, I perish." (Esther 4:9-16). Notice that prior to her bold act, Esther joined Mordecai and her fellow Jews in fasting.

Esther was very shrewd and careful in her approach to the king. He was pleased with her as his wife (perhaps remembering less than fondly the rebellious behavior of her predecessor Vasti) and welcomed her into his presence, even though it was not her scheduled time to approach him: *"On the third day Esther put on her royal robes and stood in the inner court of the palace, in front of the king's hall. The king was sitting on his royal throne in the hall, facing the entrance. When he saw Queen Esther standing in the court, he was pleased with her and held out to her the gold scepter that was in his hand. So Esther approached and touched the tip of the scepter. Then the king asked, "What is it, Queen Esther? What is your request? Even up to half the kingdom, it will be given you." "If it pleases the king," replied Esther, "let the king, together with Haman, come today to a banquet I have prepared for him." "Bring Haman at once," the king said, "so that we may do what Esther asks."* (Esther 5:1-5) Esther does not pleased the case of her people immediately, but instead asks the king- and Haman- to attend a banquet. The old adage of the "way to a man's heart is through his stomach" probably applies here!

Haman sees Mordecai once more at the city gate, and his fury against him is re-ignited. Haman had been very happy to be the only person invited to the banquet Esther was preparing, but his good mood quickly departed on seeing his hated enemy: *"Haman went out that day happy and in high spirits. But when he saw Mordecai at the king's gate and observed that he neither rose nor showed fear in his presence, he was filled with rage against Mordecai. Nevertheless, Haman restrained himself and went home."* (Esther 5:9-10). Haman even plans to have a long pole erected, and planned to have the king impale his enemy Mordecai on it: *"His wife Zeresh and all his friends said to him, "Have a pole set up, reaching to a height of fifty cubits,[a] and ask the king in the morning to have Mordecai impaled on it. Then go with the king to the banquet and enjoy yourself." This suggestion delighted Haman, and he had the pole set up."* (Esther 5:14)

Meanwhile the King discovers that Mordecai has not been properly honored for his heroic defense of the king from two assassins. In a greatly ironic twist to the story, the King orders Haman to honor Mordecai, whom Haman despises! This must have given Haman a terrible headache, for he was furious: *"Afterward Mordecai returned to the king's gate. But Haman rushed home, with his head covered in grief, and told Zeresh his wife and all his friends everything that had happened to him."* (Esther 6:12-13). A hint is given that Haman's plot against Mordecai and the Jews would fail is given in the last two verses of Esther 6:

"His advisers and his wife Zeresh said to him, "Since Mordecai, before whom your downfall has started, is of Jewish origin, you cannot stand against him—you will surely come to ruin!" While they were still talking with him, the king's eunuchs arrived and hurried Haman away to the banquet Esther had prepared." (Esther 6:13-14) Interesting observation, to say the least- because Mordecai is a Jew- you

cannot stand against him. This is a clear acknowledgement that the power of God was seen not only by God's people but by their hostile neighbors as well.

Acts 5:17-42

Theudas and Judas the Galilean were both claimants to the title Messiah. Both are recorded in ancient history, and both had influence and devoted followers for a short while (http://www.livius.org/men-mh/messiah/messianic_claimants00.html) What distinguished them from Jesus, whom the ancient historian Flavius reluctantly assigns the title "Messiah"? The answer is found in part in this portion of the Acts of the Apostles, as written by Luke*: "But a Pharisee named Gamaliel, a teacher of the law, who was honored by all the people, stood up in the Sanhedrin and ordered that the men be put outside for a little while. Then he addressed the Sanhedrin: "Men of Israel, consider carefully what you intend to do to these men. Some time ago Theudas appeared, claiming to be somebody, and about four hundred men rallied to him. He was killed, all his followers were dispersed, and it all came to nothing. After him, Judas the Galilean appeared in the days of the census and led a band of people in revolt. He too was killed, and all his followers were scattered. Therefore, in the present case I advise you: Leave these men alone! Let them go! For if their purpose or activity is of human origin, it will fail. But if it is from God, you will not be able to stop these men; you will only find yourselves fighting against God."* (Acts 5:34-39).

The evidence, even in this brief passage of Scripture, is compelling. First, the apostles were arrested for their testimony and public acts of healing and placed in the public jail. An angel of the Lord spoke to them and rescued them: *"They arrested the apostles and put them in the public jail. But during the night an angel of the Lord opened the doors of the jail and brought them out. "Go, stand in the temple courts," he said, "and tell the people all about this new life." At daybreak they entered the temple courts, as they had been told, and began to teach the people. When the high priest and his associates arrived, they called together the Sanhedrin—the full assembly of the elders of Israel—and sent to the jail for the apostles. But on arriving at the jail, the officers did not find them there. So they went back and reported, "We found the jail securely locked, with the guards standing at the doors; but when we opened them, we found no one inside." On hearing this report, the captain of the temple guard and the chief priests were at a loss, wondering what this might lead to. Then someone came and said, "Look! The men you put in jail are standing in the temple courts teaching the people." At that, the captain went with his officers and brought the apostles. They did not use force, because they feared that the people would stone them."* (Acts 5:18-26). The unexpected release from jail was a powerful testimony to the godliness of these men, and the people were galvanized by this miracle. So fervent and obvious was the mood of the people that the authorities did not move againt the disciples with force, for fear the crowd would stone them.

They managed to isolate the recently freed apostles and took them into their courts. This is simalr to the treatment given to Jesus, in that "justice" had to be administered in private away from the crowds. The testimony given by the disciples is powerful- the Spirit gave them both wisdom and eloquence as they testified: *"We*

must obey God rather than human beings! The God of our ancestors raised Jesus from the dead—whom you killed by hanging him on a cross. God exalted him to his own right hand as Prince and Savior that he might bring Israel to repentance and forgive their sins. We are witnesses of these things, and so is the Holy Spirit, whom God has given to those who obey him." (Acts 5:29b-32)

So all the "authorities" could do in this case was to have the disciples flogged and ordered not to speak in the Name of Jesus, but the disciples turned this punishment into glory in that they were privileged to suffer with their Master: *"They called the apostles in and had them flogged. Then they ordered them not to speak in the name of Jesus, and let them go. The apostles left the Sanhedrin, rejoicing because they had been counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the Name. Day after day, in the temple courts and from house to house, they never stopped teaching and proclaiming the good news that Jesus is the Messiah."* (Acts 5:40b-42)

Esther 7-10 June 23, 2014 Acts 6

The question raised by the King is now answered. Haman, who though he was selected to be at the banquest out of honor, wa selected so that all the king's outrage could be placed on him, without the distraction of others being present. Esther reveals the plot that Haman has constructed: *"So the king and Haman went to Queen Esther's banquet, 2 and as they were drinking wine on the second day, the king again asked, "Queen Esther, what is your petition? It will be given you. What is your request? Even up to half the kingdom, it will be granted." Then Queen Esther answered, "If I have found favor with you, Your Majesty, and if it pleases you, grant me my life—this is my petition. And spare my people—this is my request. 4 For I and my people have been sold to be destroyed, killed and annihilated. If we had merely been sold as male and female slaves, I would have kept quiet, because no such distress would justify disturbing the king." King Xerxes asked Queen Esther, "Who is he? Where is he—the man who has dared to do such a thing?" Esther said, "An adversary and enemy! This vile Haman!"*
Then Haman was terrified before the king and queen. 7 The king got up in a rage, left his wine and went out into the palace garden. But Haman, realizing that the king had already decided his fate, stayed behind to beg Queen Esther for his life." (Esther 7:1-7).

Then Haman gets into even more trouble by begging Queen Esther for his life. He approached the Queen, and this was seen by the King as molestation: "Just as the king returned from the palace garden to the banquet hall, Haman was falling on the couch where Esther was reclining.
The king exclaimed, "Will he even molest the queen while she is with me in the house?" (Esther 7:8a). And then Haman is executed for his nefarious plot, and the king's anger subsides (Esther 7:9-10).

So then the question is, was Haman "hanged" or "impaled"? The commentary is helpful here (http://www.ligonier.org/blog/was-haman-hanged-or-impaled/) The Western notion of "hanged" is usually interpreted as being "hanged" with a rope, the Hebrew word literally means "hang upon it"- which would include the more correct interpretation of being impaled upon the fifty cubit pole. Either way, the

cruel irony was that the very instrument that Hamn planned to use on his archenemy was used to end his life.

Now Haman was dead, but the poisonous edict to destry the Jews was still in place. Esther and Mordecai realized that this edict must be overturned or the people would face disaster. Once more, Esthre approached the King, and he pointed his gold scepter at her indicating his approval of her approach to him. This was not a trivial event- not extending the scepter would have resulted in the death of the petiotioner! Haman's evil edict was overruled by the King, and copies were dispersed to all the counties and territories under the king's rule*:" At once the royal secretaries were summoned—on the twenty-third day of the third month, the month of Sivan. They wrote out all Mordecai's orders to the Jews, and to the satraps, governors and nobles of the 127 provinces stretching from India to Cush.[c] These orders were written in the script of each province and the language of each people and also to the Jews in their own script and language. 10 Mordecai wrote in the name of King Xerxes, sealed the dispatches with the king's signet ring, and sent them by mounted couriers, who rode fast horses especially bred for the king.*

11 The king's edict granted the Jews in every city the right to assemble and protect themselves; to destroy, kill and annihilate the armed men of any nationality or province who might attack them and their women and children,[d] and to plunder the property of their enemies. 12 The day appointed for the Jews to do this in all the provinces of King Xerxes was the thirteenth day of the twelfth month, the month of Adar. 13 A copy of the text of the edict was to be issued as law in every province and made known to the people of every nationality so that the Jews would be ready on that day to avenge themselves on their enemies. 14 The couriers, riding the royal horses, went out, spurred on by the king's command, and the edict was issued in the citadel of Susa." (Esther 8:9-14)

The Jews rose up against their enemies in all the provinces of the kingdom, and also arranged for the destruction of Haman's sons: *"The Jews struck down all their enemies with the sword, killing and destroying them, and they did what they pleased to those who hated them. In the citadel of Susa, the Jews killed and destroyed five hundred men. They also killed Parshandatha, Dalphon, Aspatha, Poratha, Adalia, Aridatha, Parmashta, Arisai, Aridai and Vaizatha, the ten sons of Haman son of Hammedatha, the enemy of the Jews. But they did not lay their hands on the plunder. The number of those killed in the citadel of Susa was reported to the king that same day. The king said to Queen Esther, "The Jews have killed and destroyed five hundred men and the ten sons of Haman in the citadel of Susa. What have they done in the rest of the king's provinces? Now what is your petition? It will be given you. What is your request? It will also be granted." "If it pleases the king," Esther answered, "give the Jews in Susa permission to carry out this day's edict tomorrow also, and let Haman's ten sons be impaled on poles." So the king commanded that this be done. An edict was issued in Susa, and they impaled the ten sons of Haman. The Jews in Susa came together on the fourteenth day of the month of Adar, and they put to death in Susa three hundred men, but they did not lay their hands on the plunder."* (Esther 9:5-15)

The Festival of Purim was the result of this event in history. The celebration, like that of the Passover, is a reminder of the provision and protection of God for His people: *"Because of everything written in this letter and because of what they had seen and what had happened to them, the Jews took it on themselves to establish the custom that they and their descendants and all who join them should without fail observe these two days every year, in the way prescribed and at the time appointed. These days should be remembered and observed in every generation by every family, and in every province and in every city. And these days of Purim should never fail to be celebrated by the Jews—nor should the memory of these days die out among their descendants."* (Esther 9:26-28), Mordecai's goodness and leadership were memorialized (Esther 10). He ascended to a position of importance second only to the king. This is reminiscent of another "foreign Jew"- Joseph- who was held in high regard by the Pharaoh!

Acts 6

Persecution- even martyrdom- are the unfortunate results of faithful testimony to Jesus. Those who speak the truth- even a truth that is "inconvenient" (apologies to Al Gore)- face the consequences from those who *"loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil"* (John 3:19-NIV). There was a problem in the church about a perceived "preference" given to one group over another, so there was a selection made of men to perform what would now be regarded as a diaconal office- ministering to the people in the body of believers. Stephen was chosen as one of these. The Scripture notes that Stephen was a Spriit filled believer: *"They chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit; also Philip, Procorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolas from Antioch, a convert to Judaism. They presented these men to the apostles, who prayed and laid their hands on them."* (Acts 6:5b-6)

Stephen did much more than attend his diaconal duties, he spoke boldly to the religious leaders, especially those in the "Synagogue of Freedmen", about Jesus and his arguments were so powerful that *"they could not stand up against the wisdom the Spirit gave him as he spoke."* (Acts 6:10b). False witnesses were brought against Stephen as he was tried before the Sanhedrin, to answer charges of "blasphemy" brought by false witnesses: "We have heard Stephen speak blasphemous words against Moses and against God." (Acts 6:11) The false witnesses brought testimony against Stephen, but he was apparently untroubled by their words: *"They produced false witnesses, who testified, "This fellow never stops speaking against this holy place and against the law. For we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and change the customs Moses handed down to us." All who were sitting in the Sanhedrin looked intently at Stephen, and they saw that his face was like the face of an angel."* (Acts 6:13-15). Stephen's comfort and courage were not self-delusion, he knew that the God whose Spirit filled him was a friend and a protector. Even though Stephen would shortly face death, he remained confident and tranquil in his faith and trust!

Stephen Before the Sanhedrin Artist Unknown

Job 1-3 June 24, 2014 Acts 7:1-19

From plenty to want, from comfort to pain, from joy and excitement to fear and dread- this is the journey that Job took. God made a "bet" with Satan that His servant Job would be righteous and would continue to trust and worship Him, even under great duress. So the sequence was established- frst Satan took away (or God permitted him to take awy) Job's children, fortune and peace of mind, then- having passed this test- Job's health was taken away. This righteous man was reduced to a lonely soul, scraping the sores which covered his body with pottery shards, and urged by his wife to "curse God and die" (Job 2:9).

Many have studied this very old book-probably one of the oldest in Scripture, and found more questions than answers. Why would God, who knows all and has infinite wisdom, not "know" that Job would be faithful- why would He subject His servant to such outrage? Why did God not answer Job's numerous cries for help and for understanding? Why did God allow such worthless and unhelpful "friends" to offer their counsel, which was neither illuminating nor helpful? The answers to these questions may be forever shrouded in mystery.

Job 1 is a description of the righteousness of this faithful servant of God. He was upright and righteous, feared God and made regular sacrifices not only for himself but for his children: *"This man was blameless and upright; he feared God and shunned evil. He had seven sons and three daughters, and he owned seven thousand sheep, three thousand camels, five hundred yoke of oxen and five hundred donkeys, and had a large number of servants. He was the greatest man among all the people of the East. His sons used to hold feasts in their homes on*

their birthdays, and they would invite their three sisters to eat and drink with them. When a period of feasting had run its course, Job would make arrangements for them to be purified. Early in the morning he would sacrifice a burnt offering for each of them, thinking, "Perhaps my children have sinned and cursed God in their hearts." This was Job's regular custom." (Job 1:1b-5). The Satan appears, and God "bets" Satan that Job will be faithful, even if his wealth and children are taken away: *"Then the LORD said to Satan, "Have you considered my servant Job? There is no one on earth like him; he is blameless and upright, a man who fears God and shuns evil." "Does Job fear God for nothing?" Satan replied. "Have you not put a hedge around him and his household and everything he has? You have blessed the work of his hands, so that his flocks and herds are spread throughout the land. But now stretch out your hand and strike everything he has, and he will surely curse you to your face." The LORD said to Satan, "Very well, then, everything he has is in your power, but on the man himself do not lay a finger."* (Job 1:8-12). The disasters come fast and furios, but Job's response is one of faith and trust in God: *"At this, Job got up and tore his robe and shaved his head. Then he fell to the ground in worship and said:*

"Naked I came from my mother's womb,
and naked I will depart.
The Lord gave and the Lord has taken away;
may the name of the Lord be praised."
In all this, Job did not sin by charging God with wrongdoing." (Job 1:20-22).

Then Job's health is taken away, and he still trusts God: *"So Satan went out from the presence of the Lord and afflicted Job with painful sores from the soles of his feet to the crown of his head. Then Job took a piece of broken pottery and scraped himself with it as he sat among the ashes. His wife said to him, "Are you still maintaining your integrity? Curse God and die!" He replied, "You are talking like a foolish woman. Shall we accept good from God, and not trouble?" In all this, Job did not sin in what he said."* (Job 2:7-10)

At this point three "friends" show up to try to comfort Job in his misery and sorrow. I have often wondered if this was not the worst punishment of all- so called "friends" who offer no real help or comfort. Sometimes it is much easier to suffer alone! These friends do one good thing- they are silent for a week: *"When they saw him from a distance, they could hardly recognize him; they began to weep aloud, and they tore their robes and sprinkled dust on their heads. Then they sat on the ground with him for seven days and seven nights. No one said a word to him, because they saw how great his suffering was."* (Job 2:12-13)

Job finally breaks the silence, and does what I would certainly do in his place- he curses the day he was born: *"After this, Job opened his mouth and cursed the day of his birth. He said:*

"May the day of my birth perish,
and the night that said, 'A boy is conceived!'
That day—may it turn to darkness;
may God above not care about it;
may no light shine on it.
May gloom and utter darkness claim it once more;
may a cloud settle over it;
may blackness overwhelm it." (Job 3:1-5)

In beautiful poetry, he begins to ask a series of questions- questions which go to the very heart of man's quest for meaning in this adventure (or misadventure) we call "life": *"Why is life given to a man*
whose way is hidden,
whom God has hedged in?
For sighing has become my daily food;
my groans pour out like water.
What I feared has come upon me;
what I dreaded has happened to me.
I have no peace, no quietness;
I have no rest, but only turmoil." (Job 3:23-26)

Job The Gospel Coalition (gospelcoalition.org)

Acts 7:1-19

Stephen spoke by the power of the Spirit- and gave a description of the spiritual journey that his people had taken from Abraham on to the present. His eloquence and conviction are clear, his insight into the "why" of this journey would be astonishing, except that it came from the very Spirit of God. It always reminds me of the long explanation Jesus gave to the two fellow travelers on the way to Emmuas, when He explained the Scriptures pertaining to Himself:
"And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself." (Luke 24:27). This eloquent and pointed testimony, however, is not leading to Jesus as "good news" but to the "bad news" of His rejection by these very people hearing his outpouring. Stephen begins with Abraham, and carefully and deliberately tells the story of God's actions and interventions with His people: *"Brothers and fathers, listen to me! The God of glory appeared to our father Abraham while he was still in Mesopotamia, before he lived in Harran. 'Leave your country and your people,' God said, 'and go to the land I will show you.' "So he left the land of the Chaldeans and settled in Harran. After the death of his father, God sent him to this land where you are now living. He gave him no inheritance here, not even enough ground to set his foot on. But God promised him that he and his descendants after him would possess the land, even though at that time Abraham had no child. God spoke to him in this way: 'For four hundred years your descendants will be strangers in a country not their own, and they will be enslaved and mistreated. But I will punish the nation they serve as slaves,' God said, 'and afterward they will come out of that country and worship me in this place.' Then he gave Abraham the covenant of circumcision. And Abraham became the father of Isaac and circumcised him eight days after his birth. Later Isaac became the father of Jacob, and Jacob became the father of the twelve patriarchs. "Because the patriarchs were jealous of Joseph, they sold him as a slave into Egypt. But God was with him and rescued him from all his troubles. He gave Joseph wisdom and enabled him to gain the goodwill of Pharaoh king of Egypt. So Pharaoh made him ruler over Egypt and all his palace. "Then a famine struck all Egypt and Canaan, bringing great suffering, and our ancestors could not find food. When Jacob heard that there was grain in Egypt, he sent our forefathers on their first visit. On their second visit, Joseph told his brothers who he was, and Pharaoh learned about Joseph's family. After this, Joseph sent for his father Jacob and his whole family, seventy-five in all. Then Jacob went down to Egypt, where he and our ancestors died. Their bodies were brought back to Shechem and placed in the tomb that Abraham had bought from the sons of Hamor at Shechem for a certain sum of money. "As the time drew near for God to fulfill his promise to Abraham, the number of our people in Egypt had greatly increased. Then 'a new king, to whom Joseph meant nothing, came to power in Egypt.' He dealt treacherously with our people and oppressed our ancestors by forcing them to throw out their newborn babies so that they would die.* (Acts 17:1b-19)

I would imagine the listeners, at last at this point, were drawn to this explanation of the "story" of their people. The knowledge and insight expressed here would certainly be good evidence that Stephen was not speaking anything "blasphemous". If anything, this description of the narrative of God's dealing with His people was orthodox and conventional in every way. It is the conclusion of Stephen's speech- his pointing to Jesus as the Messiah- that causes the opposition to jell into rage.

Job 4-6 June 25, 2014 Acts 7:20-43

The first of three "fiends", Eliphaz, speaks to Job. He tries to establish the connection between sin- either of commission od omission, and the disastrous results of sin. Eliphaz' premise is based on the ethics of the day- those who were righteous prospered and those who sin suffered the consequence of their sin. The book of Job does not allow any such neat or comfortable theology- sin does bring consequences- both natural and spiritual, but sometimes awful and tragic things happen to perfectly loving, God- fearing and wonderful people. The author of the book of Job is attempting to illustrate this point with the story of Job's suffering. Job doesn't suffer because of sin- even though "all have sinned" (Romans 3:23), but Job suffers because God allows it for purposes that Job- or we- may never understand.

Eliphaz first tells Job that he should take comfort in his own righteousmess- in the simplistic ethics Eliphaz presents, this righteousness should be sufficient to guarantee a full and prosperous life*. "Should not your piety be your confidence and your blameless ways your hope?"* (Job 4:6). Seeing that Job is suffering, Eliphaz mistakenly assumes that Job's suffering must be due to sin:

"Consider now: Who, being innocent, has ever perished?
Where were the upright ever destroyed?
As I have observed, those who plow evil
and those who sow trouble reap it.". (Job 4:7-8)

Eliphaz then suggest that Job was not "righteous enough" for God:

"Can a mortal be more righteous than God?
Can even a strong man be more pure than his Maker?
If God places no trust in his servants,
if he charges his angels with error,
how much more those who live in houses of clay,
whose foundations are in the dust,
who are crushed more readily than a moth!
Between dawn and dusk they are broken to pieces;
unnoticed, they perish forever.
Are not the cords of their tent pulled up,
so that they die without wisdom?'" (Job 4:17-21)

In a rare flash of insight, Eliphaz challenges Job to please his case before God- surely a just and righteous God will answer Job's pleae for understanding and even for deliverance:

"But if I were you, I would appeal to God;
I would lay my cause before him.
He performs wonders that cannot be fathomed,
miracles that cannot be counted.
He provides rain for the earth;
he sends water on the countryside.
The lowly he sets on high,
and those who mourn are lifted to safety." (Job 5:8-11)

Eliphaz goes on to suggest that God will be fair, will hear Job's plea, and will restore Job since all God is trying to do is to "correct" his sinful ways:

“Blessed is the one whom God corrects;
so do not despise the discipline of the Almighty.
For he wounds, but he also binds up;
he injures, but his hands also heal.
From six calamities he will rescue you;
in seven no harm will touch you.
In famine he will deliver you from death,
and in battle from the stroke of the sword.
You will be protected from the lash of the tongue,
and need not fear when destruction comes.
You will laugh at destruction and famine,
and need not fear the wild animals.
For you will have a covenant with the stones of the field,
and the wild animals will be at peace with you.
You will know that your tent is secure;
you will take stock of your property and find nothing missing.” (Job 5:17-24)

Job then replies and describes his unbelievable anguish:

“If only my anguish could be weighed
and all my misery be placed on the scales!
It would surely outweigh the sand of the seas—
no wonder my words have been impetuous.
The arrows of the Almighty are in me,
my spirit drinks in their poison;
God’s terrors are marshaled against me.
Does a wild donkey bray when it has grass,
or an ox bellow when it has fodder?
Is tasteless food eaten without salt,
or is there flavor in the sap of the mallow[b]?
I refuse to touch it;
such food makes me ill.” (Job 6:2-7)

So deep and searing is Job’s pain that he prays that God would take his life and spare him further suffering:

“Oh, that I might have my request,
that God would grant what I hope for,
9 that God would be willing to crush me,
to let loose his hand and cut off my life!
Then I would still have this consolation—
my joy in unrelenting pain—
that I had not denied the words of the Holy One.” (Job 6:8-10).

Job then tells Eliphaz that he would quit his complaining if only he had some answer from God- even an answer that proved Job wrong or unrighteous:

“Teach me, and I will be quiet;
show me where I have been wrong.
How painful are honest words!
But what do your arguments prove?

Do you mean to correct what I say,
and treat my desperate words as wind?
You would even cast lots for the fatherless
and barter away your friend.
“But now be so kind as to look at me.
Would I lie to your face?
Relent, do not be unjust;
reconsider, for my integrity is at stake.[c]
Is there any wickedness on my lips?
Can my mouth not discern malice?” (Job 6:24-30).

Acts 7:20-43

Stephen continues his narrative summary of God’s dealing with His people. He begins with Moses, an unlikely savior to his people, and continues through the rejection of Moses’ leadership by the people he has just freed from 400 years of slavery in Egypt: *“But our ancestors refused to obey him. Instead, they rejected him and in their hearts turned back to Egypt. They told Aaron, ‘Make us gods who will go before us. As for this fellow Moses who led us out of Egypt—we don’t know what has happened to him!’ That was the time they made an idol in the form of a calf. They brought sacrifices to it and reveled in what their own hands had made. But God turned away from them and gave them over to the worship of the sun, moon and stars. This agrees with what is written in the book of the prophets:*

“‘Did you bring me sacrifices and offerings
forty years in the wilderness, people of Israel?
You have taken up the tabernacle of Molek
and the star of your god Rephan,
the idols you made to worship.
Therefore I will send you into exile’ beyond Babylon.” (Acts 7:39-43 quoting Amos 5:25-27).

It is likely that it was easy for the hearers of Stephen’s testimony to see the evil and sin of the children of Israel, who turned from God their Deliverer and worshipped idols. It will soon be more difficult for these same people hearing these words to see- and even realize- that they have also turned their back on God’ plan- God’s best fro the- by rejecting Jesus His Son and the true Messiah!

Job 7-9 June 24, 2014 Acts 7:44-60

Job continues his response to Eliphaz, and emphatically states that he will continue to complain to God, to the havens, and to whoever will listen about his terrible state of pain and anguish: *“Therefore I will not keep silent;*
I will speak out in the anguish of my spirit,
I will complain in the bitterness of my soul. (Job 7:11)

Furthermore, Job is distressed that God had paid so much attention to him- negative attention:

"What is mankind that you make so much of them,
that you give them so much attention,
that you examine them every morning
and test them every moment?
Will you never look away from me,
or let me alone even for an instant?
If I have sinned, what have I done to you,
you who see everything we do?
Why have you made me your target?
Have I become a burden to you?
Why do you not pardon my offenses
and forgive my sins?
For I will soon lie down in the dust;
you will search for me, but I will be no more." (Job 7:17-21)

This is almost the negative image of the delight expressed by the Psalminst in Psalm 8:

"…what is mankind that you are mindful of them,
human beings that you care for them?" (Psalm 8:4).

The Psalmist is delighted- and surprised- that God pays attention- positive, loving and caring attention to us, while Job is lamenting that he is the sole human "target" of God's negative attention!

Then Bildad speaks. First he insults Job by calling him "windy":

"How long will you say such things?
Your words are a blustering wind.
Does God pervert justice?
Does the Almighty pervert what is right?
When your children sinned against him,
he gave them over to the penalty of their sin.
But if you will seek God earnestly
and plead with the Almighty,
if you are pure and upright,
even now he will rouse himself on your behalf
and restore you to your prosperous state.
Your beginnings will seem humble,
so prosperous will your future be." (Job 8:2-7).

Bildad is convinced that if Job will "plead his case" and that his "purity" and "uprightness" will cause God to relent from His punishment. Again, this is a drastic simplification of reality. The universe is a complex and sometimes unpredictable place, and God's purposes and actions are often misunderstood and misinterpreted. The view of mankind is limited- not only in scope but in knowledge- we see and know, as Paul said, "only in part" (1 Cor 13:12). God is the only One who truly sees and knows all! Bildad, and all of thes rest of us in the human family, are unaware of

a large part of what reality actually is and consists of. Bildad insists that a fair and righteous God will not reject of continue to punish Job:

"Surely God does not reject one who is blameless
or strengthen the hands of evildoers.
He will yet fill your mouth with laughter
and your lips with shouts of joy.
Your enemies will be clothed in shame,
and the tents of the wicked will be no more." (Job 8:20-22).

Yet the misery and anguish Job is experiencing goes on, seemingly without a forseeable end or conclusion!

Job answers again:

"Indeed, I know that this is true.
But how can mere mortals prove their innocence before God?
Though they wished to dispute with him,
they could not answer him one time out of a thousand.
His wisdom is profound, his power is vast.
Who has resisted him and come out unscathed?" (Job 9:2-4)

Job is tring to find a way, any way, to plead his case, to show his "innocence" before God. He is still convinced that his is a righteous life. Surely if God would listen to him He would cease this horrible punishment!

Then follows one of my favorite Biblical illusions. Just as , as a chemist, I enjoy a deeper level of understanding of making "bitter" (alkaline) water "sweet" acidic or neutral (Exodus 15:22-27) with the use of the natural acids in a "tree" growing nearby, I am delighted by the allusion to the constellations- the Bear (Ursa Majoris) and Orion- constellations we still observe today:

"He alone stretches out the heavens
and treads on the waves of the sea.
He is the Maker of the Bear[a] and Orion,
the Pleiades and the constellations of the south.
He performs wonders that cannot be fathomed,
miracles that cannot be counted."(Job 9:8-10)

God's power is immeasurabley great. Job realizes this, and points to the inability of any one or and power to oppose Him:

"If he snatches away, who can stop him?
Who can say to him, 'What are you doing?'
God does not restrain his anger;
even the cohorts of Rahab cowered at his feet." (Job 9:12-13)

Some Bible scholars have suggested that the reference to the "cohorts of Rahab" (not the same Hebrew spelling as the prostitute Rahab) is an illusion to a sea monster that lives in the deep. Some have said that this reference, as well as those

to Leviathan, are pointing to the "deep" sins- especially pride and self-righteousness-that God is trying to deal with in Job- and in us (Job 3:8 ans Chapter 41). See http://www.burningcoal.com/Commentary/Job/job09.html)

The courtroom analogy is also pushed further as Job states:
"He is not a mere mortal like me that I might answer him,
that we might confront each other in court.
If only there were someone to mediate between us,
someone to bring us together,
someone to remove God's rod from me,
so that his terror would frighten me no more.
Then I would speak up without fear of him,
but as it now stands with me, I cannot." (Job 9:32-35).

Acts 7:44-60

Stephen then comes to the climactic ending of his inspitred testimony. He refers to the Tabernacle, firsta as the physical structure built to house the commandments and to serve as a special and dedicated place of worship, but then he goes on to describe the "true" tabernacle in which God dwells: *"However, the Most High does not live in houses made by human hands. As the prophet says:*
"'Heaven is my throne,
and the earth is my footstool.
What kind of house will you build for me?
says the Lord.
Or where will my resting place be?
Has not my hand made all these things?'" (Acts 7:48-50 quoting Isaiah 66:1-2)

Then he makes the point of his testimony even clearer but referring to the practice of God's people of killing those who bring God's prophetic Word, and refusing to live by the Law they were given: *"You stiff-necked people! Your hearts and ears are still uncircumcised. You are just like your ancestors: You always resist the Holy Spirit! Was there ever a prophet your ancestors did not persecute? They even killed those who predicted the coming of the Righteous One. And now you have betrayed and murdered him- you who have received the law that was given through angels but have not obeyed it."* (Acts 7:51-53)

Not exactly words to "win friends and influence people" (apologies to Dale Carnegie). The questions that might be asked here is "Did Stephen mean to **convict** or **convince**?" In other words, was his testimony given- clearly under the influence of the Holy Spirit- to convince the people hearing it of their error and cause them to repent, or was it given to convict of sin (and in doing so enrage them)? Some psychiatrists might "analyze" Stephen and declare that he had a "death wish"- that Stephen was subconsciously setting up his own death. Some of these same psychiatrists might also point out that Jesus could have avoided confrontation with His enemies as well by "keeping a low profile". God's truth, and

God's plan demand conviction and courage. Stepehen's martyrdom fueled the fire and spirit of a young church. Jesus' sacrifice changed all of human history and made redemption and salvation possible- the problem of sin was now remedied. None of this could have happened without the courage and conviction that we see here!

And now Stephen further enraged the crowd with his words: *"But Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, looked up to heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. "Look," he said, "I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God." At this they covered their ears and, yelling at the top of their voices, they all rushed at him, dragged him out of the city and began to stone him. Meanwhile, the witnesses laid their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul."* (Acts 7:55-58). We will see Saul/Paul later!

Stephen echoes Jesus' words as he breathed his last: *"Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." Then he fell on his knees and cried out, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them." When he had said this, he fell asleep."* (Acts 7:59b-60)

Treasures of the Bible (Church Age) -- The Stoning of Stephen

Job 10-12 June 27, 2014 Acts 8:1-25

Job has decided that his life is now "over"- it is worthless and has no hope of any redeeming event or any future joy. Since he has lost all hope, he is emboldened to

ask God questions- and has the courage to demand answers. His words are wrenching to read or hear:

“I loathe my very life;
therefore I will give free rein to my complaint
and speak out in the bitterness of my soul.
I say to God: Do not declare me guilty,
but tell me what charges you have against me.
Does it please you to oppress me,
to spurn the work of your hands,
while you smile on the plans of the wicked?
Do you have eyes of flesh?
Do you see as a mortal sees?
Are your days like those of a mortal
or your years like those of a strong man,
that you must search out my faults
and probe after my sin—
though you know that I am not guilty
and that no one can rescue me from your hand?
“Your hands shaped me and made me.
Will you now turn and destroy me?” (Job 10:1-8)

Job questions the very life he was given by God- why did God give him life and then allow such horrific things to happen to him? Job hardly knows how to pelase his own case, since it is not clear whether Job has sinned or not…he is in the prison of “not knowing” his spiritual state:

“You gave me life and showed me kindness,
and in your providence watched over my spirit.
“But this is what you concealed in your heart,
and I know that this was in your mind:
If I sinned, you would be watching me
and would not let my offense go unpunished.
If I am guilty—woe to me!
Even if I am innocent, I cannot lift my head,
for I am full of shame
and drowned in[a] my affliction.

If I hold my head high, you stalk me like a lion

and again display your awesome power against me.

You bring new witnesses against me

and increase your anger toward me;

your forces come against me wave upon wave." (Job 10:12-17)

Job clearly does not know or understand his standing before God, and intuitively knows that whatever his pleas are to God, they will be met with overwhelming opposition!

Then Zophar speaks- he is convinced that there is some hidden or "secret" sin that Job is either unaware of or is hiding from God:

"Are all these words to go unanswered?

Is this talker to be vindicated?

Will your idle talk reduce others to silence?

Will no one rebuke you when you mock?

You say to God, 'My beliefs are flawless

and I am pure in your sight.'

Oh, how I wish that God would speak,

that he would open his lips against you

and disclose to you the secrets of wisdom,

for true wisdom has two sides.

Know this: God has even forgotten some of your sin.

"Can you fathom the mysteries of God?

Can you probe the limits of the Almighty?

They are higher than the heavens above—what can you do?

They are deeper than the depths below—what can you know?

Their measure is longer than the earth

and wider than the sea." (Job 11:2-9)

Zophar seems certain that God's "secrets of wisdom" (verse 6) will be the final arbiter- no matter what Job thinks or believes, God will have the final say and provide the true insight into the heart of Job!

Job then reminds Ziophar that he is aware of the power, might and understanding and wisdom of God, and bemoans that fact that he, Job, has become a "laughingstock" to his friends (verse 4) and neighbors:

"Doubtless you are the only people who matter,

and wisdom will die with you!

But I have a mind as well as you;

I am not inferior to you.

Who does not know all these things?

"I have become a laughingstock to my friends,

though I called on God and he answered—

a mere laughingstock, though righteous and blameless!

Those who are at ease have contempt for misfortune

as the fate of those whose feet are slipping.

The tents of marauders are undisturbed,

and those who provoke God are secure—

those God has in his hand." (Job 12:2-6).

Job then attributes God with ultimate power and influence, as he realizes once more how powerless he is when set against the Almighty One:

"To God belong wisdom and power;

counsel and understanding are his.

What he tears down cannot be rebuilt;

those he imprisons cannot be released.

If he holds back the waters, there is drought;

if he lets them loose, they devastate the land.

To him belong strength and insight;

both deceived and deceiver are his.

He leads rulers away stripped

and makes fools of judges.

He takes off the shackles put on by kings

and ties a loincloth around their waist." (Job 12:13-18)

Acts 8:1-25

Persecution and opposition to the Gospel have always been only temporaty hindrances. When there is organized opposition to the Word of Gd, as there was at this time in the early church, the power of the Spirit is manifest all the more. Some may have thought that the church was discouraged or disheartened by the stoning of Stephen, especially since this was the point at which persecution began in earnest. After faithful and "godly" men buried and mourned for Stephen, the Spirit began to manifest itself in power. This power was so drastic and life changing that a former "magician" offered to pay for it! The Scriptures tell us: *"Those who had been scattered preached the word wherever they went. Philip went down to a city in Samaria and proclaimed the Messiah there. When the crowds heard Philip and saw the signs he performed, they all paid close attention to what he said. For with shrieks, impure spirits came out of many, and many who were paralyzed or lame were healed. So there was great joy in that city. Now for some time a man named Simon had practiced sorcery in the city and amazed all the people of Samaria. He*

boasted that he was someone great, and all the people, both high and low, gave him their attention and exclaimed, "This man is rightly called the Great Power of God." They followed him because he had amazed them for a long time with his sorcery. But when they believed Philip as he proclaimed the good news of the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, they were baptized, both men and women. Simon himself believed and was baptized. And he followed Philip everywhere, astonished by the great signs and miracles he saw." (Acts 8:4-13). Instead of discouragement at persectution, there was "great joy" (verse 8). And the one called "Great Power of God", Simon the sorcerer, saw the real power of God manifest in the Holy Spirit! Simon himself believed the Good News and was himself baptized- what a radical change! Simon went from sorcery to the true power of God, from darkness into light. He was, however, so "new" at the faith that he believed he could offer money in exchange for the power to bestow the Spirit. He was soundly chastised for this*: "When Simon saw that the Spirit was given at the laying on of the apostles' hands, he offered them money and said, "Give me also this ability so that everyone on whom I lay my hands may receive the Holy Spirit." Peter answered: "May your money perish with you, because you thought you could buy the gift of God with money! You have no part or share in this ministry, because your heart is not right before God. Repent of this wickedness and pray to the Lord in the hope that he may forgive you for having such a thought in your heart. For I see that you are full of bitterness and captive to sin." Then Simon answered, "Pray to the Lord for me so that nothing you have said may happen to me."* (Acts 8:18-25) Simon was probably truly repentant, he was so impressed with the power of God that he lost perspective. I am so glad that out God is so loving and forgiving, I think of the countless times He has corrected me in His wonderful, patient and gentle way.

Job 13-15 June 28, 2014 Acts 8:26-40

Job finally shows his frustration with his "friends and advisors". Wher they might have been silent and simply commiserated with him, they continued to offer "bad advice, misunderstanding and empty words" (my paraphrase) to Job. Job says to them:

"You, however, smear me with lies;

you are worthless physicians, all of you!

If only you would be altogether silent!

For you, that would be wisdom." (Job 13:4-5)

The Job goes on to repeat his plea for silence from his "advisors", and shows his unbelievably solid faith in God:

"Your maxims are proverbs of ashes;

your defenses are defenses of clay.

"Keep silent and let me speak;

then let come to me what may.

Why do I put myself in jeopardy

and take my life in my hands?

Though he slay me, yet will I hope in him;

I will surely defend my ways to his face." (Job 13:12-15)

I wonder if I could truthfully say "though He slay me, yet will I hope in Him"! Amazing and deep faith, faith that was tried and found to be solid and unyielding.

Then Job makes two requests of God:

"Only grant me these two things, God,

and then I will not hide from you:

Withdraw your hand far from me,

and stop frightening me with your terrors.

Then summon me and I will answer,

or let me speak, and you reply to me." (Job 13:20-22).

Job will have to wait seemingly forever to have these wishes granted. One might wonder why God made Job wait for so long before giving him these simple requests. I am certain that God's wisdom and timing are unexcelled- and that I, like Job, will never truly understand my loving Father God who told his servant Isaiah: *"For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways," declares the LORD."* (Isaiah 55:8)

Job then pleads to God that no one can truly be pure and righteous before God:

"Mortals, born of woman,

are of few days and full of trouble.

They spring up like flowers and wither away;

like fleeting shadows, they do not endure.

Do you fix your eye on them?

Will you bring them[b] before you for judgment?

Who can bring what is pure from the impure?

No one!

A person's days are determined;

you have decreed the number of his months

and have set limits he cannot exceed.

So look away from him and let him alone,

till he has put in his time like a hired laborer." (Job 14:1-6)

He asks "who can bring what is pure from the impure?" And he answers his own question- No one! And yet Job will be given at least part of the answer as to the Redeemer that God promised His people later in the story: "*I know that my redeemer lives, and that in the end he will stand on the earth."* (Job 19:25)

Eliphaz then answers Job, essentially saying- "you are a sinner and you know it, even though you claim to be pure and righteous." So the arguments so far by the "friends and advisors" are, in summary: 1) God is fair, and only punishes the wicked and sinful; 2) Job is suffering and clearly not in God's favor, so he must be a sinner. Eliphaz states:

"Your sin prompts your mouth;

you adopt the tongue of the crafty.

Your own mouth condemns you, not mine;

your own lips testify against you." (Job 15:5-6)

One of the many ironies in Job is that Eliphaz- and the other "friends" are right! No one is righteous- the standards are too high- perfection itself. No one has, or ever will, keep the law perfectly and thus earn salvation. (Romans 3:10)

Eliphaz then contrats those who are (mostly) righteous with those that are evil:

"What are mortals, that they could be pure,

or those born of woman, that they could be righteous?

If God places no trust in his holy ones,

if even the heavens are not pure in his eyes,

how much less mortals, who are vile and corrupt,

who drink up evil like water!" (Job 15:14-16)

It is interesting to speculate on the meaning of the phrase "holy ones" (verse 15) Some have speculated that the "holy ones" were either angels or the saints called by God (http://biblehub.com/job/15-15.htm)

Eliphaz goes on to say that the pleasures of life and of riches are short lived in those that are evil and do not place their trust in God:

"Though his face is covered with fat

and his waist bulges with flesh,

he will inhabit ruined towns

and houses where no one lives,

houses crumbling to rubble.

He will no longer be rich and his wealth will not endure,

nor will his possessions spread over the land.

He will not escape the darkness;

a flame will wither his shoots,

and the breath of God's mouth will carry him away.

Let him not deceive himself by trusting what is worthless,

for he will get nothing in return." (Job 15:27-31)

The chapter concludes with some rather dark observations about the fundamental nature of the human heart and original sin:

"They conceive trouble and give birth to evil;

their womb fashions deceit." (Job 15:35)

Acts 8:26-40

Philip, like so many of us, is called to share the Good News. We sometimes find surprising and unexpected opportunities to share the Gospel, if we are faithful and trust God for the opportunity and the increase. Philip had such an opoortunity, in the desert of all places, and with a high placed government official: *"Now an angel of the Lord said to Philip, "Go south to the road—the desert road—that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza." So he started out, and on his way he met an Ethiopian eunuch, an important official in charge of all the treasury of the Kandake (which means "queen of the Ethiopians"). This man had gone to Jerusalem to worship, and on his way home was sitting in his chariot reading the Book of Isaiah the prophet. The Spirit told Philip, "Go to that chariot and stay near it."* (Acts 8:26-19). Notice that God used two means to communicate His will to Philip- 1) the angel of the Lord; and 2) the Spirit himself. The wonderful truth is that Philip was open to God's leading and sensitive to the guidance and direction of God's Spirit!

The eunuch was reading Isaiah, and did not understand what he was reading. We sometimes encounter the same thing- we are reading God's Word, but are not given- at least at that moment- understanding and insight. But the power of the Word is that it never "retuns empty" (Isaiah 55:11), and it certainly does not return "empty" here. Philip is given the opoortunity to share the Good News: *"Then Philip began with that very passage of Scripture and told him the good news about Jesus."* (Acts 8:35).

As happens so many times, the joy that a new convert feels is overwhelming. They want to start right away in a life of obedience and gratitude to God. Once they traveled a little further down the road, some water was spotted and the eunuch saw an opportunity to be baptized that very day: *"As they traveled along the road, they came to some water and the eunuch said, "Look, here is water. What can stand in the way of my being baptized?" And he gave orders to stop the chariot. Then both Philip and the eunuch went down into the water and Philip baptized him."* (Acts 8:36-38)

An amazing thing then happens- Philip is taken away by the Spirit, and then reappears some distance away- at Azotus, near Caesarea: *"When they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord suddenly took Philip away, and the eunuch did not see him again, but went on his way rejoicing. Philip, however, appeared at Azotus and traveled about, preaching the gospel in all the towns until he reached Caesarea."* (Acts 8:39-40)

From the Complete Bible Study Clip Art © Gospel Light

Job 16-18 June 29, 2014 Acts 9:1-22

Job has finally had enough of his "friends'" and their well meaning but useless words. He is surprised that they have been so long-winded. Perhaps they spoke because they could not imagine another response: *"I have heard many things like these;*

you are miserable comforters, all of you!

Will your long-winded speeches never end?

What ails you that you keep on arguing?

I also could speak like you,

if you were in my place;

I could make fine speeches against you

and shake my head at you.

But my mouth would encourage you;

comfort from my lips would bring you relief." (Job 16:1-5)

Job feels the full wrath of God, and is overwhelmed by the outpouring of misery and pain he has received, yet he is still faithful and trusts God (verse 17)- truly amazing:

"God assails me and tears me in his anger

and gnashes his teeth at me;

my opponent fastens on me his piercing eyes.

People open their mouths to jeer at me;

they strike my cheek in scorn

and unite together against me.

God has turned me over to the ungodly
and thrown me into the clutches of the wicked.
All was well with me, but he shattered me;
he seized me by the neck and crushed me.
He has made me his target;
his archers surround me.
Without pity, he pierces my kidneys
and spills my gall on the ground.
Again and again he bursts upon me;
he rushes at me like a warrior.
"I have sewed sackcloth over my skin
and buried my brow in the dust.
My face is red with weeping,
dark shadows ring my eyes;
yet my hands have been free of violence
and my prayer is pure." (Job 16:9-17)

Where can one find a man (or woman) that is truly wise? Such a person is rare indeed. Job seems to be saying in verse 10 "I will not find a wise man among you: (Job 17:10) that a wise person might make some sense out of what has happened to him:

"God has made me a byword to everyone,
a man in whose face people spit.
My eyes have grown dim with grief;
my whole frame is but a shadow.
The upright are appalled at this;
the innocent are aroused against the ungodly.
Nevertheless, the righteous will hold to their ways,
and those with clean hands will grow stronger.
"But come on, all of you, try again!
I will not find a wise man among you.
My days have passed, my plans are shattered.
Yet the desires of my heart
turn night into day;
in the face of the darkness light is near.

If the only home I hope for is the grave,

if I spread out my bed in the realm of darkness,

if I say to corruption, 'You are my father,'

and to the worm, 'My mother' or 'My sister,'

where then is my hope—

who can see any hope for me?

Will it go down to the gates of death?

Will we descend together into the dust?" (Job 17:6-16)

Bildad then returns to the theme of "Job is (realy, even though he is not aware of it or admits it) sinful, therefore he is suffering". Job's patience must have been almost as taxed with these friends as with God's temporary dealing with him!:

"He is driven from light into the realm of darkness

and is banished from the world.

He has no offspring or descendants among his people,

no survivor where once he lived.

People of the west are appalled at his fate;

those of the east are seized with horror.

Surely such is the dwelling of an evil man;

such is the place of one who does not know God." (Job 18:18-21)

Acts 9:1-22

I just had the opportunity to portray Paul's dramatic conversion experience at our vacation Bible School. I have heard (and read) this story many times, but what became particularly vivid to me was the total helplessness that Saul/Paul must have felt when Jesus dramatically encountered him- with light, voice and blindness! He was powerful, proud and full of resolute desire- fueled by his own "righteousness"- to eliminate this rebel band. Then he learned about humility and dependence on God's grace- lessons he needed to absorb before becoming a mighty servant of the Lord! Paul was issuing "murderous threats" right before this dramatic event occurred: *"Meanwhile, Saul was still breathing out murderous threats against the Lord's disciples. He went to the high priest and asked him for letters to the synagogues in Damascus, so that if he found any there who belonged to the Way, whether men or women, he might take them as prisoners to Jerusalem. As he neared Damascus on his journey, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. He fell to the ground and heard a voice say to him, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" "Who are you, Lord?" Saul asked. "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting," he replied. "Now get up and go into the city, and you will be told*

what you must do." The men traveling with Saul stood there speechless; they heard the sound but did not see anyone. Saul got up from the ground, but when he opened his eyes he could see nothing. So they led him by the hand into Damascus. For three days he was blind, and did not eat or drink anything." (Acts 9:1-9)

Ananias, in total obedience to God, eneterd the presence of his once deadlty enemy and ministered to hi. Paul's experience showed him in a dramatic way the "tender mercies" of God (Psalm 25:5 *KJV "Remember, O Lord, thy tender mercies and thy lovingkindnesses; for they have been ever of old."*) *"Then Ananias went to the house and entered it. Placing his hands on Saul, he said, "Brother Saul, the Lord—Jesus, who appeared to you on the road as you were coming here—has sent me so that you may see again and be filled with the Holy Spirit." Immediately, something like scales fell from Saul's eyes, and he could see again. He got up and was baptized, and after taking some food, he regained his strength."* (Acts 9:17-19)

Paul then gained credentials by this series of events- the people who heard him preach about Jesus remembered that Paul was the one who had very recently been a persecutor of the very church he now was building: *"At once he began to preach in the synagogues that Jesus is the Son of God. All those who heard him were astonished and asked, "Isn't he the man who raised havoc in Jerusalem among those who call on this name? And hasn't he come here to take them as prisoners to the chief priests?" Yet Saul grew more and more powerful and baffled the Jews living in Damascus by proving that Jesus is the Messiah."* (Acts 9:20-22). Only a powerful and convincing person like Paul could "prove" that Jesus is the Messiah!

La conversion de Saint Paul by Luca Giordano (1690), Museum of Fine Arts of Nancy.

Job 19-20 June 30, 2014 Acts 9:23-43

Job responds again. Showing his frustration with the arrogance and judgmental attitude of his "friends":

"How long will you torment me
and crush me with words?
Ten times now you have reproached me;
shamelessly you attack me.
If it is true that I have gone astray,
my error remains my concern alone.
If indeed you would exalt yourselves above me
and use my humiliation against me,
then know that God has wronged me
and drawn his net around me." (Job 19:2-6)

Job feels wronged- that Gos has been unfair to him and has trapped Job in a "net". Perhaps the worst part of Job's torment is his feeling of isolation from those he loves and loved- his family. He has truly been "alienated" from them- alienated by their death:

"He has alienated my family from me;
my acquaintances are completely estranged from me.
My relatives have gone away;
my closest friends have forgotten me.
My guests and my female servants count me a foreigner;
they look on me as on a stranger.
I summon my servant, but he does not answer,
though I beg him with my own mouth.
My breath is offensive to my wife;
I am loathsome to my own family.
Even the little boys scorn me;
when I appear, they ridicule me.
All my intimate friends detest me;
those I love have turned against me." (Job 19:13-19).

I almost laught when I read the words "my breath is offensive to my wife". I guess I've seen way too many mouthwash commercials! Then follows the most astonishing words- words one would never expect from one so besieged by physical and metal torments- a statement of faith in God as Redeemer. Somehow Job was

able to see that God was a Redeemer, and that He would send the True Redeemer not only to Job but to us all:

“Oh, that my words were recorded,

that they were written on a scroll,

that they were inscribed with an iron tool on lead,

or engraved in rock forever!

I know that my redeemer lives,

and that in the end he will stand on the earth.

And after my skin has been destroyed,

yet in my flesh I will see God;

I myself will see him

with my own eyes—I, and not another.

How my heart yearns within me!” (Job 19:23-27).

The words “I know that my Redeemer lives” have been memorialized forever in the beautiful and memorable oratorio Mesiah by George Frederic Handel (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Messiah_(Handel))

The words seen here in Job are part of the oration:

I know that my Redeemer liveth, and that he shall stand at the latter day upon the earth. And though worms destroy this body, yet in my flesh shall I see God.

How glorious a vision in the midst of pain and suffering. I almost have wished that the story of Job would end here, with Job’r realization that the sin that still stains even his “rightoursness” would be dealt with once and for all. Yet Job still must deal with the growing realization that his sin, like the Leviathan, is an ugly monster that swims in the depths of his soul.

Zophar then describes Job’s sin to him, stating what seems to be obvious to him- Job must have sinned- intentionally or unintentionally. Otherwise God would not be right or “righteous” in punishing Job:

“My troubled thoughts prompt me to answer

because I am greatly disturbed.

I hear a rebuke that dishonors me,

and my understanding inspires me to reply.

“Surely you know how it has been from of old,

ever since mankind[a] was placed on the earth,

that the mirth of the wicked is brief,

the joy of the godless lasts but a moment.

Though the pride of the godless person reaches to the heavens

and his head touches the clouds,

he will perish forever, like his own dung;

those who have seen him will say, 'Where is he?'

Like a dream he flies away, no more to be found,

banished like a vision of the night." (Job 20:2-8)

According to Zophar, God is angry with Job- and rightfully so since Job has sinned:

"When he has filled his belly,
God will vent his burning anger against him
and rain down his blows on him." (Job 20:23)

Also we see the same theme in verses 28 and 29:

A flood will carry off his house,

rushing waters on the day of God's wrath.

Such is the fate God allots the wicked,

the heritage appointed for them by God." (Job 20:28-29).

Job must be "wicked", otherwise God would not be angry with him and unleashing punishment on him!

Acts 9:23-43

Saul's evangelism was so powerful and effective that the Jews decided to eliminate him, and plotted to take his life. Only by removing Saul by stealth- in a basket through and opening in the city wall- did he escape: *"After many days had gone by, there was a conspiracy among the Jews to kill him, but Saul learned of their plan. Day and night they kept close watch on the city gates in order to kill him. But his followers took him by night and lowered him in a basket through an opening in the wall."* (Acts 9:23-25)

The followers of Jesus were still unsure about Saul- understandably since Saul had been a key player in the persecution, jailing and even killing of Chritians (followers of the Way, as they were known then). The testimony of Barnabas about Saul's effective and courageous preaching and teaching turned their opinions in a positive direction*: "When he came to Jerusalem, he tried to join the disciples, but they were all afraid of him, not believing that he really was a disciple. But Barnabas took him and brought him to the apostles. He told them how Saul on his journey had seen the Lord and that the Lord had spoken to him, and how in Damascus he had preached fearlessly in the name of Jesus. So Saul stayed with them and moved about freely in Jerusalem, speaking boldly in the name of the Lord."* (Acts 9:26-28) He argued with the Hellenistic (Greek) Jews, who tried to kill him! (verse 29).

The church continued to grow, both in numbers and in power. The recipe was simple- living in fear of the Lord and by the power of the Spirit: "*Then the church throughout Judea, Galilee and Samaria enjoyed a time of peace and was strengthened. Living in the fear of the Lord and encouraged by the Holy Spirit, it increased in numbers."* (Acts 9:31).

Paul was beginning a powereful ministry that would lead to evangelization and church planting among the Gentiles- Peter was beginning a ministry primarily to his own people, the Jews at the same time. In Lydda Peter healed Aeneas, bedridden and crippled for years: *"Aeneas," Peter said to him, "Jesus Christ heals you. Get up and roll up your mat." Immediately Aeneas got up. All those who lived in Lydda and Sharon saw him and turned to the Lord."* (Acts 9:34-35) In Joppa Peter broug Tabitha (Dorcas) back to life: *"About that time she became sick and died, and her body was washed and placed in an upstairs room. Lydda was near Joppa; so when the disciples heard that Peter was in Lydda, they sent two men to him and urged him, "Please come at once!" Peter went with them, and when he arrived he was taken upstairs to the room. All the widows stood around him, crying and showing him the robes and other clothing that Dorcas had made while she was still with them. Peter sent them all out of the room; then he got down on his knees and prayed. Turning toward the dead woman, he said, "Tabitha, get up." She opened her eyes, and seeing Peter she sat up. He took her by the hand and helped her to her feet. Then he called for the believers, especially the widows, and presented her to them alive. This became known all over Joppa, and many people believed in the Lord."* (Acts 9:37-42).

Notice that both of these miracles were done not to add to the credentials of the healer but to bring glory and honor to God! As we see in the story of Tabitha/Dorcas, the restoration of life led to belief in the Lord.

Job 21-22 July 1, 2014 Acts 10:1-23

Job then asks an important question…why do the wicked prosper- even for a while? He cannot understand whu the righteous suffer and the wicked live a life of luxury and ease:

"Is my complaint directed to a human being?
Why should I not be impatient?
Look at me and be appalled;
clap your hand over your mouth.
When I think about this, I am terrified;
trembling seizes my body.

Why do the wicked live on,
growing old and increasing in power?
They see their children established around them,
their offspring before their eyes.
Their homes are safe and free from fear;
the rod of God is not on them.
Their bulls never fail to breed;
their cows calve and do not miscarry.
They send forth their children as a flock;
their little ones dance about." (Job 21:4-11)

Job then continues with his description of the "propsperous sinners" and their apparent advantage and prestige:

"They are carried to the grave,
and watch is kept over their tombs.
The soil in the valley is sweet to them;
everyone follows after them,
and a countless throng goes[d] *before them.*
"So how can you console me with your nonsense?
Nothing is left of your answers but falsehood!" (Job 21:32-34)

Eliphaz then asks a deep and philosophical questions- how does man bebefit God- evan a wise and righteous man? Then he again accuses Job of sinful indifference to the needs and plight of those who sought his help:

"Can a man be of benefit to God?
Can even a wise person benefit him?
What pleasure would it give the Almighty if you were righteous?
What would he gain if your ways were blameless?
"Is it for your piety that he rebukes you
and brings charges against you?
Is not your wickedness great?
Are not your sins endless?
You demanded security from your relatives for no reason;
you stripped people of their clothing, leaving them naked.
You gave no water to the weary
and you withheld food from the hungry,

though you were a powerful man, owning land—

an honored man, living on it.

And you sent widows away empty-handed

and broke the strength of the fatherless.

That is why snares are all around you,

why sudden peril terrifies you,

why it is so dark you cannot see,

and why a flood of water covers you." (Job 22:2-11).

Eliphaz points out that Job "gave no water to the weary" and "withheld food from the hungry". This is similar to the passage in the Gospels about the sheep and goats (Matt 25:31-46), especially verse 32, wherer Jesus addresses the sinners (the goats): "For I was hungry and you gave me nothing to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink…" It would surprise me, though, if Job was not a generous, caring and empathetic man who would have shoen caring and compassion. Yet Eliphaz accuses him otherwise.

Eliphaz then develops a new theme- submit to God. If Job would only submit to God's wisdom and justice, and accept His correction, all would be well:

"Submit to God and be at peace with him;

in this way prosperity will come to you.

Accept instruction from his mouth

and lay up his words in your heart.

If you return to the Almighty, you will be restored:

If you remove wickedness far from your tent

and assign your nuggets to the dust,

your gold of Ophir to the rocks in the ravines,

then the Almighty will be your gold,

the choicest silver for you.

Surely then you will find delight in the Almighty

and will lift up your face to God.

You will pray to him, and he will hear you,

and you will fulfill your vows.

What you decide on will be done,

and light will shine on your ways." (Job 22:21-28).

Yet Job is submissive if nothing else- argumentative perhaps, but certainly submissive to God. Job still has to deal with the "sea monster" within, and will continue to suffer in blind ignorance until he does see this "monster" within!

Acts 10:1-23

It was time for the gospel to be shared with the Gentiles. This is a strange notion to us in the modern world, where Jewish Christians are in the tiny monirity, and most Christains are not of Jewish descent. This was, however, a contentious topic in the early chrch. Many converted Jews felt that new convert must first follow the Law, including circumcision, before being baptized and joining the body of beilievers. A righteous Gentile Cornelius, a Roman centurion, was led to the church leaders by a vison.

God had prepared Peter for this occasion by giving him a vision of his own- in which the usual distinctions of "clean and unclean" were removed: *"About noon the following day as they were on their journey and approaching the city, Peter went up on the roof to pray. He became hungry and wanted something to eat, and while the meal was being prepared, he fell into a trance. He saw heaven opened and something like a large sheet being let down to earth by its four corners. It contained all kinds of four-footed animals, as well as reptiles and birds. Then a voice told him, "Get up, Peter. Kill and eat." "Surely not, Lord!" Peter replied. "I have never eaten anything impure or unclean." The voice spoke to him a second time, "Do not call anything impure that God has made clean." This happened three times, and immediately the sheet was taken back to heaven."* (Acts 10:9-16)

Peter was reluctant to remove this distinction. The provisions of the Law, and keeping the Law, were central to Peter's understanding of God. Peter was not allowed to stay in his old understandin- God was moving in his heart and mind to show him the larger picture- the Gospel was for everyone!

Cornelius' vision prepared him for a great change in his life and inderstanding as well: *"At Caesarea there was a man named Cornelius, a centurion in what was known as the Italian Regiment. He and all his family were devout and God-fearing; he gave generously to those in need and prayed to God regularly. One day at about three in the afternoon he had a vision. He distinctly saw an angel of God, who came to him and said, "Cornelius!" Cornelius stared at him in fear. "What is it, Lord?" he asked. The angel answered, "Your prayers and gifts to the poor have come up as a memorial offering before God. Now send men to Joppa to bring back a man named Simon who is called Peter. He is staying with Simon the tanner, whose house is by the sea." When the angel who spoke to him had gone, Cornelius called two of his servants and a devout soldier who was one of his attendants. He told them everything that had happened and sent them to Joppa."* (Acts 10:1-8). Notice Cornelius instant and complete obedience…he sent his servants right away to find and bring Peter to him!

And coincidentally (as one might say- but this is clearly a "God-instance" and not any coincidence) as Peter was still thinking about his vision, the two men sent by Cornelius arrived:

While Peter was wondering about the meaning of the vision, the men sent by Cornelius found out where Simon's house was and stopped at the gate. They called out, asking if Simon who was known as Peter was staying there. While Peter was still thinking about the vision, the Spirit said to him, "Simon, three men are looking for you. So get up and go downstairs. Do not hesitate to go with them, for I have sent them." Peter went down and said to the men, "I'm the one you're looking for.

Why have you come?" The men replied, "We have come from Cornelius the centurion. He is a righteous and God-fearing man, who is respected by all the Jewish people. A holy angel told him to ask you to come to his house so that he could hear what you have to say." Then Peter invited the men into the house to be his guests." (Acts 10:17-23). Peter invited the men into his house as "guests", and was therefore prepared to share with them and invite them into God's kingdom. God always prepares the way, and obedient hearts are wise to follow!

Job 23-25 July 2, 2014 Acts 10:24-48

"Where's Waldo?"- a popular cartoon game where the character Waldo is hidden in a forest of details. Job certainly did not regard his search for the Creator a game, but I would imaginge that his search was every bit as frustrating as this "hidden character" game sometimes is to me. Job simply wants to find God, and then question Him so that he can begin to make sense out of all that has happened to and around him. His search, however, yields no fruit:

"If only I knew where to find him;
if only I could go to his dwelling!
I would state my case before him
and fill my mouth with arguments.
I would find out what he would answer me,
and consider what he would say to me.
Would he vigorously oppose me?
No, he would not press charges against me.
There the upright can establish their innocence before him,
and there I would be delivered forever from my judge.
"But if I go to the east, he is not there;
if I go to the west, I do not find him.
When he is at work in the north, I do not see him;
when he turns to the south, I catch no glimpse of him.
But he knows the way that I take;
when he has tested me, I will come forth as gold." (Job 23:3-10)

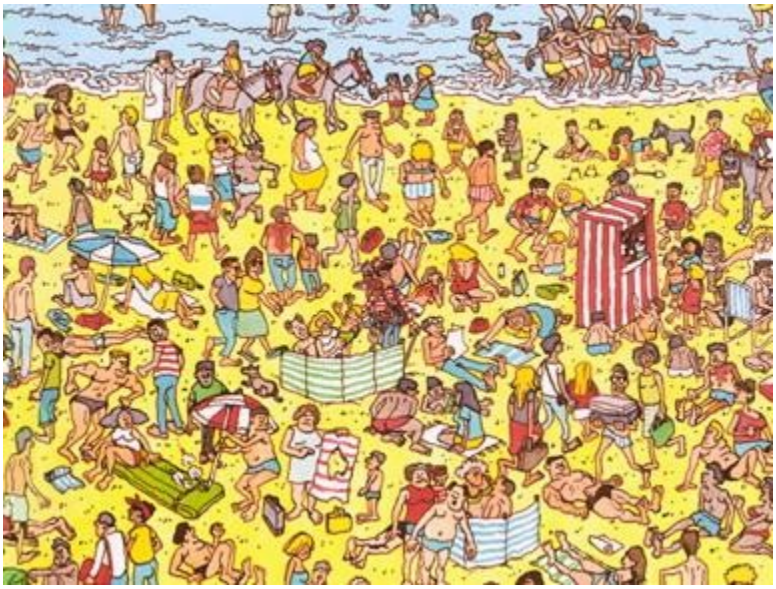
There is a small hint of hope that God will, after all, find Job to be righteous, as Job states in verse 10 "when He has tested me, I will come forth as gold". Job feels that his righteousness will emerge as the gold from the dross in the refiner's fire of his God. Then Job again laments the unapproachable, powerful and ultimately mysterious nature of God:

"But he stands alone, and who can oppose him?
He does whatever he pleases.
He carries out his decree against me,

and many such plans he still has in store.
That is why I am terrified before him;
when I think of all this, I fear him.
God has made my heart faint;
the Almighty has terrified me.
Yet I am not silenced by the darkness,
by the thick darkness that covers my face." (Job 23:13-17) God has truly made Jopb's heart "faint"...and can we condemn him for his fear and terror?

Job again complains that he has no way of "making an appointment" to see God, that God does not appoint special times in which He can be accessed or questioned:
"Why does the Almighty not set times for judgment?
Why must those who know him look in vain for such days?
There are those who move boundary stones;
they pasture flocks they have stolen.
They drive away the orphan's donkey
and take the widow's ox in pledge.
They thrust the needy from the path
and force all the poor of the land into hiding.
Like wild donkeys in the desert,
the poor go about their labor of foraging food;
the wasteland provides food for their children." (Job 24:1-5)
He contrasts himself with those evil ones who move boundary stones- effectively stealing land, who dribve away the orphan's donkey (like car theft) and take the widow's ox in pledge- effectively rendering her helpless financially. How could a loving and just God do these things to Job, who has never been a "sinner"?

Bildad then (again) questions Job's righteousness, and contrasts the sinfulness of all men with the power, purity and righteousness of God:
"Dominion and awe belong to God;
he establishes order in the heights of heaven.
Can his forces be numbered?
On whom does his light not rise?
How then can a mortal be righteous before God?
How can one born of woman be pure?
If even the moon is not bright
and the stars are not pure in his eyes,
how much less a mortal, who is but a maggot—
a human being, who is only a worm!" (Job 25:2-6)



Where's Waldo?

Acts 10:24-48

Peter then goes to Cornelius' house. Peter is surprised when Cornelius falls at his ffet, but Peter quickly assures Cornelius that he is only a believer: *"The following day he arrived in Caesarea. Cornelius was expecting them and had called together his relatives and close friends. As Peter entered the house, Cornelius met him and fell at his feet in reverence. But Peter made him get up. "Stand up," he said, "I am only a man myself."* (Acts 10:24-26). This is somewhat reminiscent of the scene in the Revelation to John: "*At this I fell at his feet to worship him. But he said to me, "Don't do that! I am a fellow servant with you and with your brothers and sisters who hold to the testimony of Jesus. Worship God! For it is the Spirit of prophecy who bears testimony to Jesus."* (Rev. 19:10)

Then a very crucial moment arrives- Peter begins to see that the Law- which forbids the association of Jews with Gentiles- is too narrow for the Good News. The fact that the Holy Spirit has been at work in these Gentiles, filling them as the Spirit filled the Jews, shows Peter that God does not separate mankind into "us" and "them". All of us believers are bound together in a new reality- the fellowship, kinship and friendship which comes from the very Spirit of God! *"You are well aware that it is against our law for a Jew to associate with or visit a Gentile. But God has shown me that I should not call anyone impure or unclean. So when I was sent for, I came without raising any objection. May I ask why you sent for me?" Cornelius answered: "Three days ago I was in my house praying at this hour, at three in the afternoon. Suddenly a man in shining clothes stood before me and said, 'Cornelius, God has heard your prayer and remembered your gifts to the poor. Send to Joppa for Simon who is called Peter. He is a guest in the home of Simon the tanner, who lives by the sea.' So I sent for you immediately, and it was good of you to come. Now we are all here in the presence of God to listen to everything the Lord has commanded you to tell us." Then Peter began to speak: "I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism but accepts from every nation the one who fears him and does what is right."* (Acts 10:28-35). They key verse is verse 34- I now realize that God does not show favoritism. This realization did not instantly transform all the Jewish

believers into kind and accepting “brothers and sister”, but it opened the door for the Spirit to work. Does this mean that the Law is worthless and should be abandoned? Not at all- Jesus said so Himself! (Matthew 5:17- see also http://www.gotquestions.org/abolish-fulfill-law.html) The fulfillment of the Law is the Law in its fullest and purest expression- this is what Jesus brought to them and brings to us.

And God, the Master of perfest timing, gave illustration to the fact that these “new believers” who were outside the Jewish family were every bit as beloved by God as those He chose from the beginning of His covenant. The believers were filled with the Spirit, and began to manifest this filling with the signs of speaking in tongues and praising God: *“While Peter was still speaking these words, the Holy Spirit came on all who heard the message. The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astonished that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on Gentiles. For they heard them speaking in tongues and praising God.*
Then Peter said, “Surely no one can stand in the way of their being baptized with water. They have received the Holy Spirit just as we have.” So he ordered that they be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. Then they asked Peter to stay with them for a few days.” (Acts 10:44-48)

Job 26-28 July 3, 2014 Acts 11

Job then asks Bildad what the source of his (or any other person’s) wisdom is. He is trying to convince Bildad that God is beyond understanding, beyond and insight or revelation we may have, and that he alone is the source of all that is and was:
“How you have helped the powerless!
How you have saved the arm that is feeble!
What advice you have offered to one without wisdom!
And what great insight you have displayed!
Who has helped you utter these words?
And whose spirit spoke from your mouth?” (Job 26:2-4)
He describes God this way:
He spreads out the northern skies over empty space;
he suspends the earth over nothing.
He wraps up the waters in his clouds,
yet the clouds do not burst under their weight.
He covers the face of the full moon,
spreading his clouds over it.
He marks out the horizon on the face of the waters
for a boundary between light and darkness.
The pillars of the heavens quake,
aghast at his rebuke.
By his power he churned up the sea;
by his wisdom he cut Rahab to pieces.
By his breath the skies became fair;
his hand pierced the gliding serpent.
And these are but the outer fringe of his works;
how faint the whisper we hear of him!
Who then can understand the thunder of his power?” (Job 26:7-14)

Job then defiantly proclaims his integrity, and states that he will maintain his position of blamelessness:

"As surely as God lives, who has denied me justice,
the Almighty, who has made my life bitter,
as long as I have life within me,
the breath of God in my nostrils,
my lips will not say anything wicked,
and my tongue will not utter lies.
I will never admit you are in the right;
till I die, I will not deny my integrity.
I will maintain my innocence and never let go of it;
my conscience will not reproach me as long as I live." (Job 26:2-6)

Job then states that the "godless" could not speak with any knowledge or clarity about God- they don't know him- but that he will instruct them:

"I will teach you about the power of God;
the ways of the Almighty I will not conceal.
You have all seen this yourselves.
Why then this meaningless talk?" (Job 26:11-12)

There is then what the NIV calls an "interlude" in which the protagonists consider the source, location and nature of wisdom. Job is accurate when he states to his listeners:

"God understands the way to it
and he alone knows where it dwells,
for he views the ends of the earth
and sees everything under the heavens.
When he established the force of the wind
and measured out the waters,
when he made a decree for the rain
and a path for the thunderstorm,
then he looked at wisdom and appraised it;
he confirmed it and tested it.
And he said to the human race,
"The fear of the Lord—that is wisdom,
and to shun evil is understanding." (Job 27:23-28).

And there we have it! The source of wisdom is the fear of the Lord- and understanding is "shunning" or excluding and avoiding evil. We will see the same truth later in the writings of Solomon in Ecclesiastes:

Now all has been heard;
here is the conclusion of the matter:
Fear God and keep his commandments,
for this is the duty of all mankind.
For God will bring every deed into judgment,
including every hidden thing,
whether it is good or evil." (Eccles 12:13-14)

Acts 11

Peter then explains his actions in accepting Cornelius and the "Gentiles" into the family of faith. It is not surprising that this question would arise, since many Jewish believers still insisted that one must be a Jew first- by conversion- before one could be a "true follower" of Jesus. His explanation cuts to the heart of the matter when Peter explains that the Holy Spirit Himself did not distinguish among Jews and Gentiles. Thus, the authority of God Himself was the authority that these Gentiles were accepted into the fellowship:

"As I began to speak, the Holy Spirit came on them as he had come on us at the beginning. Then I remembered what the Lord had said: 'John baptized with[a] water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.' So if God gave them the same gift he gave us who believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I to think that I could stand in God's way?" When they heard this, they had no further objections and praised God, saying, "So then, even to Gentiles God has granted repentance that leads to life." (Acts 11:15-18)

The church the spread to Antioch, where the believers in The Way were first called "Christians": *"Then Barnabas went to Tarsus to look for Saul, and when he found him, he brought him to Antioch. So for a whole year Barnabas and Saul met with the church and taught great numbers of people. The disciples were called Christians first at Antioch."* (Acts 11:25-26).

The church was growing rapidly- suddenly there was hope, and life and love available to the people where previously there had only been darkness ad despair. And the Scriptures describe how rapid that growth was- the Word was truly falling on fertile ground: *"The Lord's hand was with them, and a great number of people believed and turned to the Lord."* (Acts 11:21). Barnabus, a man full of grace and the Spirit, was also an effective tool for evangelism: *"He was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and faith, and a great number of people were brought to the Lord."* (Acts 11:24).

When the Word of God reaches hearts that are hungry and tired of the "old ways" of living, the message is eagerly received. We see much evidence of this today, where in countries with very limited religious freedom, literally millions are turning to God and joyfully receiving the Good News! (http://www.charismamag.com/spirit/devotionals/daily-breakthroughs?view=article&id=3316&catid=560)

Job 29-30 July 4, 2014 Acts 12

Abundance and want, health and devastating illness, comfort and misery- these are the contrasts that Job expresses in these two chapters. He vivdly describes his life before the "great cosmic bet" between God and Satan. He was propsperous, happy, well respected and in the very prime of his life:

"How I long for the months gone by,

for the days when God watched over me,

when his lamp shone on my head
and by his light I walked through darkness!
Oh, for the days when I was in my prime,
when God's intimate friendship blessed my house,
when the Almighty was still with me
and my children were around me,
when my path was drenched with cream
and the rock poured out for me streams of olive oil.
"When I went to the gate of the city
and took my seat in the public square,
the young men saw me and stepped aside
and the old men rose to their feet;
the chief men refrained from speaking
and covered their mouths with their hands;
the voices of the nobles were hushed,
and their tongues stuck to the roof of their mouths.
Whoever heard me spoke well of me,
and those who saw me commended me,
because I rescued the poor who cried for help,
and the fatherless who had none to assist them. (Job 29:2-12)

And then seemingly without warning, cause or reason, Job's whole world was reduced to a "smoking crater" as Satan was allowed to do his worst- only sparing his life:

"And now my life ebbs away;
days of suffering grip me.
Night pierces my bones;
my gnawing pains never rest.
In his great power God becomes like clothing to me[e];
he binds me like the neck of my garment.
He throws me into the mud,
and I am reduced to dust and ashes.
"I cry out to you, God, but you do not answer;
I stand up, but you merely look at me.
You turn on me ruthlessly;
with the might of your hand you attack me.

You snatch me up and drive me before the wind;

you toss me about in the storm.

I know you will bring me down to death,

to the place appointed for all the living." (Job 30:16-23)

This raises an important issue- can we really trust God with everything- our lives, our family, our spiritual, physical and emotional health? Job could make a strong case for the graciousness, generosity and mercy of God- based on his first experience. He could make an equally compelling case that God could not be trusted based on the tragedy that his life had become. What are we then to think?

My trivial and non- theological solution is simple- we know God as a forgiving, loving and merciful God who is our Advocate and Caregiver- and once we have known and trusted Him in this role we depend on this revelation to get us through the dark and troubling times that inevitably come. We "trust the God we know" to survive the times when he seems silent, distant or even hostile!

Acts 12

Persecution came quickly- this time in the form of Herod. He killed James, borther of John, and arrested Peter. Herod had no doubt noticed the key role that peter was playing in the new church, and thought that arresting him would be the first step in eliminating this new "movement" that he saw as a threat to his powe and authority. *"It was about this time that King Herod arrested some who belonged to the church, intending to persecute them. He had James, the brother of John, put to death with the sword. When he saw that this met with approval among the Jews, he proceeded to seize Peter also. This happened during the Festival of Unleavened Bread. After arresting him, he put him in prison, handing him over to be guarded by four squads of four soldiers each. Herod intended to bring him out for public trial after the Passover. So Peter was kept in prison, but the church was earnestly praying to God for him. The night before Herod was to bring him to trial, Peter was sleeping between two soldiers, bound with two chains, and sentries stood guard at the entrance. Suddenly an angel of the Lord appeared and a light shone in the cell. He struck Peter on the side and woke him up. "Quick, get up!" he said, and the chains fell off Peter's wrists. Then the angel said to him, "Put on your clothes and sandals." And Peter did so. "Wrap your cloak around you and follow me," the angel told him. Peter followed him out of the prison, but he had no idea that what the angel was doing was really happening; he thought he was seeing a vision. They passed the first and second guards and came to the iron gate leading to the city. It opened for them by itself, and they went through it. When they had walked the length of one street, suddenly the angel left him. Then Peter came to himself and said, "Now I know without a doubt that the Lord has sent his angel and rescued me from Herod's clutches and from everything the Jewish people were hoping would happen."* (Acts 12:1-11)

God had the last word here, and this was just the first of several miraculous prison rescuses He would perform- we will see another in Acts 16! Peter's friends and fellow believers could hardly believe that he escaped. Herod was naturally

displeased by this turn of events, and had the guards who had “failed” executed: *“In the morning, there was no small commotion among the soldiers as to what had become of Peter. After Herod had a thorough search made for him and did not find him, he cross-examined the guards and ordered that they be executed.”* (Acts 12:18-19)

The arrogance and irreverence for God and His people would soon bring Herod an early death. God is not mocked (Gal. 6:7*): “On the appointed day Herod, wearing his royal robes, sat on his throne and delivered a public address to the people. They shouted, “This is the voice of a god, not of a man.” Immediately, because Herod did not give praise to God, an angel of the Lord struck him down, and he was eaten by worms and died. But the word of God continued to spread and flourish.”* (Acts 12:21-24)

Death of Herod Standard Publishing

Job 31-32 July 5, 2014 Acts 13:1-23

Job then again protests his awful treatment, and justifies himself by comparing himself with others. This is one of the oldests strategies that we as “chronic sinners” use- we can always find a person “more sinful” than we are. At least we are not like “them” we say to ourselves or anyone who might listen or take notice:

“If I have walked with falsehood

or my foot has hurried after deceit—
let God weigh me in honest scales
and he will know that I am blameless—
if my steps have turned from the path,
if my heart has been led by my eyes,
or if my hands have been defiled,
then may others eat what I have sown,
and may my crops be uprooted." (Job 31:5-8)

Then Job gives further examples of his "righteousness" and finally ceases his monologue:

"if my land cries out against me
and all its furrows are wet with tears,
if I have devoured its yield without payment
or broken the spirit of its tenants,
then let briers come up instead of wheat
and stinkweed instead of barley."
The words of Job are ended." (Job 31:38-40).

Finally a young man speaks and breaks his former silence. This is Elihu, who has "held his tongue" until now, and seeks to explain the real reason or reasons that Job is in suvh a trerrible state:

"So these three men stopped answering Job, because he was righteous in his own eyes. But Elihu son of Barakel the Buzite, of the family of Ram, became very angry with Job for justifying himself rather than God. He was also angry with the three friends, because they had found no way to refute Job, and yet had condemned him. Now Elihu had waited before speaking to Job because they were older than he. But when he saw that the three men had nothing more to say, his anger was aroused. So Elihu son of Barakel the Buzite said:

"I am young in years,
and you are old;
that is why I was fearful,
not daring to tell you what I know.
I thought, 'Age should speak;
advanced years should teach wisdom.'
But it is the spirit[d] in a person,
the breath of the Almighty, that gives them understanding.

It is not only the old who are wise,

not only the aged who understand what is right.

“Therefore I say: Listen to me;

I too will tell you what I know.” (Job 32:1-10)

The apparent reason for Job’s problems with sin (and with his own “hidden” sinfulness) are revealed in this passage. Job was “righteous in his own eyes” and thus was in the same category as the Israelites in the book of Judges, who “did what was right in their own eyes” (Judges 17:6)

Elihu builds himself up claims to have wisdom that was missing in his “elders”, but instead of pursuing the root of the sinfulness Job does not realize or acknowledge, he instead ends up repreating another version of what has already been said:

“I too will have my say;

I too will tell what I know.

For I am full of words,

and the spirit within me compels me;

inside I am like bottled-up wine,

like new wineskins ready to burst.

I must speak and find relief;

I must open my lips and reply.

I will show no partiality,

nor will I flatter anyone;

for if I were skilled in flattery,

my Maker would soon take me away.” (Job 32:17-22)

Acts 13:1-23

The Holy Spirit is the principal character in Acts. Although the New Testament bopok is name “the acts of the apostles” it might better be named “the acts of the Holy Spirit”. Nowhere is this more evident than in theis chapter of Acts. First, the Spirit leads to Saul and Barnabas being set aside- consecrated- for evangelistic work: *“While they were worshiping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, “Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.” So after they had fasted and prayed, they placed their hands on them and sent them off.”* (Acts 13:2).

The Holy Spirit then filled Saul/Paul and caused him to condemn the sorcerer Elymas to temporary blindness, which convinced the proconsul Serguis Paulus to believe the Good News about Jesus: *"Then Saul, who was also called Paul, filled with the Holy Spirit, looked straight at Elymas and said, "You are a child of the devil and an enemy of everything that is right! You are full of all kinds of deceit and trickery. Will you never stop perverting the right ways of the Lord? Now the hand of the Lord is against you. You are going to be blind for a time, not even able to see the light of the sun." Immediately mist and darkness came over him, and he groped about, seeking someone to lead him by the hand. When the proconsul saw what had happened, he believed, for he was amazed at the teaching about the Lord."* (Acts 13:9-12)

Then Paul traveled to Antioch, and after the Scriptures were read in the synagogue, spoke powerful and convincing words about the Lord Jesus to his fellow Jews: *"Fellow Israelites and you Gentiles who worship God, listen to me! The God of the people of Israel chose our ancestors; he made the people prosper during their stay in Egypt; with mighty power he led them out of that country; for about forty years he endured their conduct in the wilderness; and he overthrew seven nations in Canaan, giving their land to his people as their inheritance. All this took about 450 years. "After this, God gave them judges until the time of Samuel the prophet. Then the people asked for a king, and he gave them Saul son of Kish, of the tribe of Benjamin, who ruled forty years. After removing Saul, he made David their king. God testified concerning him: 'I have found David son of Jesse, a man after my own heart; he will do everything I want him to do.' "From this man's descendants God has brought to Israel the Savior Jesus, as he promised."* (Acts 13:16-23).

What do we see the Spirit doing here? First the Spirit empowers those who are set aside for special callings of service to the church. Secondly, He (not it!) shows the power of God to convert key believers. Thirdly, it empowers those testifying to have power and influebce in the minds and hearts of listeners- so that they may believe and be saved. This is exactly what the Spirit does today!

Job 33-34 July 6, 2014 Acts 13:24-52

And now Elihu wants to add his observations- and presumably his wisdom- to the discourse. He doubts Job's assertions that he is blameless, simply because that would not be consistent with the "punishment" he is receiving at the hnd of God. His point of view is very similar to that of the three "friends and counselors" that have preceeded him. His words are:

"But now, Job, listen to my words;
pay attention to everything I say.
I am about to open my mouth;
my words are on the tip of my tongue.
My words come from an upright heart;
my lips sincerely speak what I know.
The Spirit of God has made me;

the breath of the Almighty gives me life.
Answer me then, if you can;
stand up and argue your case before me.
I am the same as you in God's sight;
I too am a piece of clay.
No fear of me should alarm you,
nor should my hand be heavy on you.
"But you have said in my hearing—
I heard the very words—
'I am pure, I have done no wrong;
I am clean and free from sin.
Yet God has found fault with me;
he considers me his enemy.
He fastens my feet in shackles;
he keeps close watch on all my paths.'
"But I tell you, in this you are not right,
for God is greater than any mortal." (Job 33:1-12)

He goes on to say that God is incapable of "wrongdoing", so the conclusion must be that Job has sinned in some hidden or yet undisclosed way. His logic does not permit God to be God- since God is above logic and reason, and in some profound ways in unknowable or unintelligible to us mere humans:

"Hear my words, you wise men;
listen to me, you men of learning.
For the ear tests words
as the tongue tastes food.
Let us discern for ourselves what is right;
let us learn together what is good.
"Job says, 'I am innocent,
but God denies me justice.
Although I am right,
I am considered a liar;
although I am guiltless,
his arrow inflicts an incurable wound.'
Is there anyone like Job,
who drinks scorn like water?
He keeps company with evildoers;

he associates with the wicked.
For he says, 'There is no profit
in trying to please God.'
"So listen to me, you men of understanding.
Far be it from God to do evil,
from the Almighty to do wrong.
He repays everyone for what they have done;
he brings on them what their conduct deserves.
It is unthinkable that God would do wrong,
that the Almighty would pervert justice." (Job 34:2-12).

Elihu's conclusion is that Job is wrong, or at least does not know or understand what he is saying:

"Men of understanding declare,
wise men who hear me say to me,
'Job speaks without knowledge;
his words lack insight.'
Oh, that Job might be tested to the utmost
for answering like a wicked man!
To his sin he adds rebellion;
scornfully he claps his hands among us
and multiplies his words against God." (Job 34:34-37)

In Elihu's understanding, Job is adding defiance to his list of sins- Job is viewed as being "scornful" of God!

Acts 13:24-52

Paul contunies his sermon/discourse, describing the nature, purpose, and works of Jesus as the complete fulfilment of all of God's covenenat and covenant promises to His people. His words are truly Spirit breathed, and they have great power of persuasion and conviction: *Before the coming of Jesus, John preached repentance and baptism to all the people of Israel. As John was completing his work, he said: 'Who do you suppose I am? I am not the one you are looking for. But there is one coming after me whose sandals I am not worthy to untie.' "Fellow children of Abraham and you God-fearing Gentiles, it is to us that this message of salvation has been sent. The people of Jerusalem and their rulers did not recognize Jesus, yet in condemning him they fulfilled the words of the prophets that are read every Sabbath. Though they found no proper ground for a death sentence, they asked Pilate to have him executed. When they had carried out all that was written about him, they took him down from the cross and laid him in a tomb. But God raised him*

from the dead, and for many days he was seen by those who had traveled with him from Galilee to Jerusalem. They are now his witnesses to our people. "We tell you the good news: What God promised our ancestors he has fulfilled for us, their children, by raising up Jesus. As it is written in the second Psalm:

"'You are my son;

today I have become your father.'

God raised him from the dead so that he will never be subject to decay. As God has said,

"'I will give you the holy and sure blessings promised to David.' So it is also stated elsewhere: "'You will not let your holy one see decay.' "Now when David had served God's purpose in his own generation, he fell asleep; he was buried with his ancestors and his body decayed. But the one whom God raised from the dead did not see decay. "Therefore, my friends, I want you to know that through Jesus the forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you. Through him everyone who believes is set free from every sin, a justification you were not able to obtain under the law of Moses. Take care that what the prophets have said does not happen to you:

"'Look, you scoffers,

wonder and perish,

for I am going to do something in your days

that you would never believe,

even if someone told you.'" (Acts 13:24-41 quoting Psalm 2:7, Isaiah 55:3, Psalm 16:10 and Hab. 1:5)

The opposition of many Jews was beginning to build momentum. This "new way" was gaining converts daily, and many devout Jews sincerely believed this was a blasphemy or worse. After all, hadn't Jesus Himself been tried and foung guilty of "blasphemy"? So the opposition became more serious and pervasive: *"On the next Sabbath almost the whole city gathered to hear the word of the Lord. When the Jews saw the crowds, they were filled with jealousy. They began to contradict what Paul was saying and heaped abuse on him. Then Paul and Barnabas answered them boldly: "We had to speak the word of God to you first. Since you reject it and do not consider yourselves worthy of eternal life, we now turn to the Gentiles. For this is what the Lord has commanded us:*

"'I have made you a light for the Gentiles,

that you may bring salvation to the ends of the earth.'"

When the Gentiles heard this, they were glad and honored the word of the Lord; and all who were appointed for eternal life believed." (Acts 13:44-48)

But despite incitement, despite organized opposition, in spite of the small minded and closed minded opposition that the Gospel faced, it grew even stronger both in numbers and in fervor. This is how God acts among us- His Word will "never return empty" (Isaiah 55:11) And there was joy among God's people! *"The word of the Lord spread through the whole region. But the Jewish leaders incited the God-fearing women of high standing and the leading men of the city. They stirred up persecution against Paul and Barnabas, and expelled them from their region. So*

they shook the dust off their feet as a warning to them and went to Iconium. And the disciples were filled with joy and with the Holy Spirit." (Acta 13:49-52)

Job 35-37 July 7, 2014 Acts 14

Elihu, perhaps in spite of himself, then makes an excellent point- what does Job (or anyone) gain by not sinning? Unfortunately Elihu only sees the consequence of sin in terms of harm or injury to other persons and not to God. To be precise, it is not God Himself that is diminished by our sin, but our relationship with Him. We are damaged, He simply becomes (or allows Himself to become) less accessible to us when we sin:

"Do you think this is just?
You say, 'I am in the right, not God.'
Yet you ask him, 'What profit is it to me,
and what do I gain by not sinning?'
"I would like to reply to you
and to your friends with you.
Look up at the heavens and see;
gaze at the clouds so high above you.
If you sin, how does that affect him?
If your sins are many, what does that do to him?
If you are righteous, what do you give to him,
or what does he receive from your hand?
Your wickedness only affects humans like yourself,
and your righteousness only other people." (Job 35:2-8)

Elhu then "defends the honor of God" by describing His wonderful ways in dealing with us, sinner or righteous. Still, Elihu has missed the point…how can one describe the indescribable, apply frail human logic to the Author of logic, or reduce God to intellectual "bite sized pieces" so that we can digest and truly understand Him? Yet he goes on to say with confidence:

"Bear with me a little longer and I will show you
that there is more to be said in God's behalf.
I get my knowledge from afar;
I will ascribe justice to my Maker.
Be assured that my words are not false;
one who has perfect knowledge is with you.
"God is mighty, but despises no one;

he is mighty, and firm in his purpose.
He does not keep the wicked alive
but gives the afflicted their rights.
He does not take his eyes off the righteous;
he enthrones them with kings
and exalts them forever.
But if people are bound in chains,
held fast by cords of affliction,
he tells them what they have done—
that they have sinned arrogantly." (Job 36:2-9).

Finally there is a hint of the awesome magnitude and power of God- an at least an allusion to His mystery and "otherness"- this is a prelude to God's own words in Job 38:

How great is God—beyond our understanding!
The number of his years is past finding out.
"He draws up the drops of water,
which distill as rain to the streams;
the clouds pour down their moisture
and abundant showers fall on mankind.
Who can understand how he spreads out the clouds,
how he thunders from his pavilion?
See how he scatters his lightning about him,
bathing the depths of the sea.
This is the way he governs the nations
and provides food in abundance.
He fills his hands with lightning
and commands it to strike its mark.
His thunder announces the coming storm;
even the cattle make known its approach." (Job 36:26-33)

Simlar words are found in Job 37:

"Listen to this, Job;
stop and consider God's wonders.
Do you know how God controls the clouds
and makes his lightning flash?
Do you know how the clouds hang poised,

those wonders of him who has perfect knowledge?
You who swelter in your clothes
when the land lies hushed under the south wind,
can you join him in spreading out the skies,
hard as a mirror of cast bronze?
"Tell us what we should say to him;
we cannot draw up our case because of our darkness.
Should he be told that I want to speak?
Would anyone ask to be swallowed up?
Now no one can look at the sun,
bright as it is in the skies
after the wind has swept them clean.
Out of the north he comes in golden splendor;
God comes in awesome majesty.
The Almighty is beyond our reach and exalted in power;
in his justice and great righteousness, he does not oppress.
Therefore, people revere him,
for does he not have regard for all the wise in heart?" (Job 37:14-24)

Acts 14

Preaching- conversion- opposition and division. These were the experiences of Paul and Barnabas as they preached the Good News to the Jews in the synagogues and other places where they gathered. So serious was the opposition of the "unconverted and unconvinced" Jews that Paul and Barnabas faced stoning: "So Paul and Barnabas spent considerable time there, speaking boldly for the Lord, who confirmed the message of his grace by enabling them to perform signs and wonders. 4 The people of the city were divided; some sided with the Jews, others with the apostles. 5 There was a plot afoot among both Gentiles and Jews, together with their leaders, to mistreat them and stone them. 6 But they found out about it and fled to the Lycaonian cities of Lystra and Derbe and to the surrounding country, 7 where they continued to preach the gospel." (Acts 14:3-7) Instead of becoming discouraged or giving up, they went to Lystra and Derbe, where they were able to

heal a cripple and continue preaching and testifying. This should be a model for us- when we are opposed, move and keep loving, serving and glorifying God! He will lead us to the place we are to go and will bless our obedience and willinness to follow.

There was a dramatic healing in Lystra. So dramatic and impressive was Paul's healing that the local people thought he was a god, and Paul had to vigorously oppose their desire to make sacrifices to him: *"In Lystra there sat a man who was lame. He had been that way from birth and had never walked. He listened to Paul as he was speaking. Paul looked directly at him, saw that he had faith to be healed and called out, "Stand up on your feet!" At that, the man jumped up and began to walk. When the crowd saw what Paul had done, they shouted in the Lycaonian language, "The gods have come down to us in human form!" Barnabas they called Zeus, and Paul they called Hermes because he was the chief speaker. The priest of Zeus, whose temple was just outside the city, brought bulls and wreaths to the city gates because he and the crowd wanted to offer sacrifices to them. But when the apostles Barnabas and Paul heard of this, they tore their clothes and rushed out into the crowd, shouting: "Friends, why are you doing this? We too are only human, like you. We are bringing you good news, telling you to turn from these worthless things to the living God, who made the heavens and the earth and the sea and everything in them. In the past, he let all nations go their own way. Yet he has not left himself without testimony: He has shown kindness by giving you rain from heaven and crops in their seasons; he provides you with plenty of food and fills your hearts with joy." Even with these words, they had difficulty keeping the crowd from sacrificing to them."* (Acts 14:8-18) It is amazing to me that Jesus could perform'signs and winders" –including healing- and yet found responses from those witnessing these "signs" to be surprisingly varied. Here, the pagan crowd responded almost immediately and tried to "worship" Paul. Maybe they did not have the prejudices of the Jews, who were deeply divided over Jesus. Maybe they were more impressionable or easily swayed. At any rate, a group of Jews (who presumably had heard about this healing) arrived on the scene and turned the "crowd" against Paul: *"Then some Jews came from Antioch and Iconium and won the crowd over. They stoned Paul and dragged him outside the city, thinking he was dead. But after the disciples had gathered around him, he got up and went back into the city. The next day he and Barnabas left for Derbe."* (Acts 14:19-20) So Paul went from "hero

deserving worship" to "one who should be stoned". Once again, God preserved Paul's life so he could continue on his mission of preaching, and eventually- church planting!

It was then on to Derbe, where the church planting and mentoring/nurturing took place. I am not certain I would survive eaven a near stoning and promptly get up and ask God "where do you want me to go next?" But that is exactly what Paul did: *"They preached the gospel in that city and won a large number of disciples. Then they returned to Lystra, Iconium and Antioch, strengthening the disciples and encouraging them to remain true to the faith. "We must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God," they said. Paul and Barnabas appointed elders for them in each church and, with prayer and fasting, committed them to the Lord, in whom they had put their trust. After going through Pisidia, they came into Pamphylia, and when they had preached the word in Perga, they went down to Attalia. From Attalia they sailed back to Antioch, where they had been committed to the grace of God for the work they had now completed. On arriving there, they gathered the church together and reported all that God had done through them and how he had opened a door of faith to the Gentiles. And they stayed there a long time with the disciples."* (Acts 14:21-28)

The Sacrifice at Lystra by Raphael (1515)

Job 38-39 July 8, 2014 Acts 15:1-21

Answers- finally some answers. In the rabbinic tradition, one often answered a question with another question. This was not to evade answering but to demonstrate to the questioner that the one answering- the rabbi- knew more about

the subject and understood more about the subject than was being asked. There is an additional dimension to the "questions as answers" section of Job- God is addressing the real problem- the real sin- that Job has- that of self righteousness and pride. This is symbolically shown previously as a sea monster in the depths. Job's sin, like the sea monster, was hidden but very real and very evil in nature. Now God has a chance to be the unfettered and wise Creator that He is: *"Then the LORD spoke to Job out of the storm. He said:*

"Who is this that obscures my plans
with words without knowledge?
Brace yourself like a man;
I will question you,
and you shall answer me.
"Where were you when I laid the earth's foundation?
Tell me, if you understand.
Who marked off its dimensions? Surely you know!
Who stretched a measuring line across it?
On what were its footings set,
or who laid its cornerstone—
while the morning stars sang together
and all the angels shouted for joy?
"Who shut up the sea behind doors
when it burst forth from the womb,
when I made the clouds its garment
and wrapped it in thick darkness,
when I fixed limits for it
and set its doors and bars in place,
when I said, 'This far you may come and no farther;
here is where your proud waves halt'? (Job 38:1-11)

These were not quiet words spoken in hished tones- God literally "shouted" and spoke out of a storm! He wanted to be certain that Job- and his "advisors and friends" heard Him!

God continues to pepper Job with questions in rapid fire order- "Do you know? Do you watch?":

"Do you know when the mountain goats give birth?
Do you watch when the doe bears her fawn?

Do you count the months till they bear?

Do you know the time they give birth?

They crouch down and bring forth their young;

their labor pains are ended.

Their young thrive and grow strong in the wilds;

they leave and do not return." (Job 39:1-4)

Then God contrasts not only His creative power and infinite wisdom with that of Job, but also by doing so shows Job by contrast that he has never created anything or commanded certain things to be:

"Does the hawk take flight by your wisdom

and spread its wings toward the south?

Does the eagle soar at your command

and build its nest on high?

It dwells on a cliff and stays there at night;

a rocky crag is its stronghold.

From there it looks for food;

its eyes detect it from afar.

Its young ones feast on blood,

and where the slain are, there it is." (Job 39:26-30)

Acts 15:1-21

How does one become a Christian believer? Does the person need to go through obedience and knowledge of the Law and circumcision first, or can they simply be believe the Good News, be baptized and receive the Holy Spirit? The Pharisees maintained that a person must go through conversion or adherence to Judaism first, then become a Christian. Was this because that was their experience, and they were short sighted and stubborn about their experience being the standard?

Paul argued and discussed this issue with them, and the future of the church was in the balance. If all believers had to enter the Christian life through Judaism. Then the power and appeal of the faith would be sidetracked or diminished. Paul had clearly seen that gentiles received the Holy Spirit- exactly as the (former) Jews had, and his argument was powerful. Why should we discriminate and make distinctions that God has not made? The Scriptural narrative states it like this: *"Certain people came down from Judea to Antioch and were teaching the believers: "Unless you are circumcised, according to the custom taught by Moses, you cannot be saved." This brought Paul and Barnabas into sharp dispute and debate with them. So Paul and Barnabas were appointed, along with some other believers, to go up to Jerusalem to see the apostles and elders about this question. The church sent them on their way, and as they traveled through Phoenicia and Samaria, they told how the Gentiles had*

been converted. This news made all the believers very glad. When they came to Jerusalem, they were welcomed by the church and the apostles and elders, to whom they reported everything God had done through them. Then some of the believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees stood up and said, "The Gentiles must be circumcised and required to keep the law of Moses." The apostles and elders met to consider this question. After much discussion, Peter got up and addressed them: "Brothers, you know that some time ago God made a choice among you that the Gentiles might hear from my lips the message of the gospel and believe. God, who knows the heart, showed that he accepted them by giving the Holy Spirit to them, just as he did to us. He did not discriminate between us and them, for he purified their hearts by faith. Now then, why do you try to test God by putting on the necks of Gentiles a yoke that neither we nor our ancestors have been able to bear? No! We believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved, just as they are." (Acts 15:1-11) Instead of becoming "very glad" (verse 3) about the Gentile believers, the Pharisees wanted to put "a yoke" (verse 10) around their necks!

Paul and Barnabas then testified about the signs and wonders that God had performed among the Gentiles:*"The whole assembly became silent as they listened to Barnabas and Paul telling about the signs and wonders God had done among the Gentiles through them. When they finished, James spoke up. "Brothers," he said, "listen to me. Simon has described to us how God first intervened to choose a people for his name from the Gentiles."* (Acts 15:12-14). Then James goes on to show that this blessing and inclusion of the Gentiles among those who are truly God's people was spoken about in Scripture (Amos 9:11-12).

Job 40-42 July 9, 2014 Acts 15:22-41

Answers, repentance and then restoration. The cycle of Job's experience with God and with his "friends" is now completed. Job is amazed, surprised and impressed with what he has heard from his Creator. He then does something that shows his surprise and shock- a "microexpression"" that reveals his true feelings- he puts his hand over his mouth: *"I am unworthy—how can I reply to you? I put my hand over my mouth."* (Job 40:4). In the South we sometimes say "well hush my mouth"… something Job might have said if he were from southern Israel! He is awed and thunderstruck at what he has heard, and he repents of his previous insistence on his own way and his own wisdom. This may have been the very insight God was trying to give Job, for God repeats His description of the Leviathan/sea monster. Any time something is repeated in Scripture, it is for emphasis! God describes the sea creature:

"Look at Behemoth,

which I made along with you

and which feeds on grass like an ox.

What strength it has in its loins,

what power in the muscles of its belly!

Its tail sways like a cedar;

the sinews of its thighs are close-knit.

Its bones are tubes of bronze,

its limbs like rods of iron.

It ranks first among the works of God,

yet its Maker can approach it with his sword." (Job 40:15-19).

The creature is "first among the ranks" of created beings, but God- the Maker, can approach it with his sword. God is clearly superior to this incredible created being… as He is with every created thing! Some creation researchers believe that this behemoth is a depiction of a dinosaur. The attention then turns to Leviathan, which is a sea creature- also large and forboding- and also a created being over which God has power and dominio:

"Can you pull in Leviathan with a fishhook

or tie down its tongue with a rope?

Can you put a cord through its nose

or pierce its jaw with a hook?

Will it keep begging you for mercy?

Will it speak to you with gentle words?

Will it make an agreement with you

for you to take it as your slave for life?

Can you make a pet of it like a bird

or put it on a leash for the young women in your house?

Will traders barter for it?

Will they divide it up among the merchants?

Can you fill its hide with harpoons

or its head with fishing spears?

If you lay a hand on it,

you will remember the struggle and never do it again!

Any hope of subduing it is false;

the mere sight of it is overpowering.

No one is fierce enough to rouse it.

Who then is able to stand against me?" (Job 41:1-10).

Behemoth and Leviathan, watercolor by William Blake from his Illustrations of the Book of Job.

Finally there is repentance by Job, who finally realizes his true place and importance in God's created world. He is sorry for his previous atttitudes of self-righteousness, and he turns away from (literally repents) his previous ways.

God then shows both His anger and mercy- anger at the "friends" and mercy in His restoration of Job's health, family and fortune: *"After the Lord had said these things to Job, he said to Eliphaz the Temanite, "I am angry with you and your two friends, because you have not spoken the truth about me, as my servant Job has. So now take seven bulls and seven rams and go to my servant Job and sacrifice a burnt offering for yourselves. My servant Job will pray for you, and I will accept his prayer and not deal with you according to your folly. You have not spoken the truth about me, as my servant Job has."* (Job 42:7-8)

When God restores, He truly restores in a generous way: "*After Job had prayed for his friends, the LORD restored his fortunes and gave him twice as much as he had before. All his brothers and sisters and everyone who had known him before came and ate with him in his house. They comforted and consoled him over all the trouble the LORD had brought on him, and each one gave him a piece of silver and a gold ring. The LORD blessed the latter part of Job's life more than the former part. He had fourteen thousand sheep, six thousand camels, a thousand yoke of oxen and a thousand donkeys. And he also had seven sons and three daughters. The first daughter he named Jemimah, the second Keziah and the third Keren-Happuch. Nowhere in all the land were there found women as beautiful as Job's daughters,*

and their father granted them an inheritance along with their brothers. After this, Job lived a hundred and forty years; he saw his children and their children to the fourth generation. ¹⁷ And so Job died, an old man and full of years." (Job 42:10-17)

Acts 15:22-41

No barriers for the Gentiles- a seemingly small point but one of enormous significance. The doorway was now open for Gentile believers to assume and equal place in the new and growing church of Jesus Christ. They should not eat meat sacrificed to idols, or engage in sexual (or other!) immorality. A small concession, but one that offered an entryway into the growing church. The "apostles and elders" of the church in Jerusalem sent a letter to these new believers: *"We have heard that some went out from us without our authorization and disturbed you, troubling your minds by what they said. So we all agreed to choose some men and send them to you with our dear friends Barnabas and Paul— men who have risked their lives for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore we are sending Judas and Silas to confirm by word of mouth what we are writing. It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us not to burden you with anything beyond the following requirements: You are to abstain from food sacrificed to idols, from blood, from the meat of strangled animals and from sexual immorality. You will do well to avoid these things."* (Acts 15:24-29)

The people of Antioch read this letter and were encouraged: *"So the men were sent off and went down to Antioch, where they gathered the church together and delivered the letter. The people read it and were glad for its encouraging message. Judas and Silas, who themselves were prophets, said much to encourage and strengthen the believers."* (Acts 15:30-32)

Another disagreement marred the unity of the early church- this time among the leadership. Paul had an issue with Mark, and decided to take Silas with him instead of Barnabas as a traveling companion and fellow evangelist. Then Barnabas and Mark went their way to Cyprus, whereas Paul and Silas went to Syria and Cilicia: *"Some time later Paul said to Barnabas, "Let us go back and visit the believers in all the towns where we preached the word of the Lord and see how they are doing." Barnabas wanted to take John, also called Mark, with them, but Paul did not think it wise to take him, because he had deserted them in Pamphylia and had not continued with them in the work. They had such a sharp disagreement that they parted company. Barnabas took Mark and sailed for Cyprus, but Paul chose Silas and left, commended by the believers to the grace of the Lord. He went through Syria and Cilicia, strengthening the churches."* (Acts 15:36-41) Fortunately, God overruled in this contentious disagreement, and the important thing- the highest priotity- evangelization and church planting and nurturing- was accomplished in spite of the divisive attitudes of these early church leaders.

Psalm 1-3 July 10, 2014 Acts 16:1-15

Joyous heartfelt worship- songs of praise- these are the ingredients of Scriptural worship. The Psalms are a collection of "worship songs"- more than just beautiful poetry- these psalms are set to music. Although the tunes have been lost to

antiquity, modern settings to the Psalms by such composers as Jane Marshall remind us of the power of music to touch us deeply in our souls.

Psalm 1 is a song of contrasts- ont e one hand, the one who is righteous- “right living” and who loves, respects, honors and keeps the Law of the God he knows intimately and personally. One the other hand we have the wicked. The ascription of many of the Psalms to David is appropriate- for he lived a life of faith and dependence on his wonderful and loving God!

Of the righteous the Psalmist states:

“Blessed is the one

who does not walk in step with the wicked

or stand in the way that sinners take

or sit in the company of mockers,

but whose delight is in the law of the Lord,

and who meditates on his law day and night.

That person is like a tree planted by streams of water,

which yields its fruit in season

and whose leaf does not wither—

whatever they do prospers. (Psalm 1:1-3)

Contrast this glowing picture with that of the wicked:

Not so the wicked!

They are like chaff

that the wind blows away.

Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment,

nor sinners in the assembly of the righteous.

For the Lord watches over the way of the righteous,

but the way of the wicked leads to destruction.” (Psalm 1:4-6)

In these few short verses we see the great divide between those who love and honor God, and those who insist on their own way and by doing so dishonor the very God who made them!

I can never read Psalm 2 without thinking of my departed friend Bruce Andrews. His mother, who his disrespectfully referred to as “crazy”, wrote a column for the local newspaper entitle “Why do the heathen rage?” Certainly not the same class of accomplishment as the aria in Handel’s Messiah:” 1. Why do the heathen rage, and why do the people imagine a vain thing? 2. The kings of the earth rise up, and the rulers take counsel together, against the Lord, and against His Anointed…”

Certainly these words have a trimeless story to tell. In ancient times, as well as now, men “plot and plan” to do their evil work- but God is, was, and always will be in complete control. The Psalmist writes:

"Why do the nations conspire
and the peoples plot in vain?
The kings of the earth rise up
and the rulers band together
against the Lord and against his anointed, saying,
"Let us break their chains
and throw off their shackles."
The One enthroned in heaven laughs;
the Lord scoffs at them.
He rebukes them in his anger
and terrifies them in his wrath, saying,
"I have installed my king
on Zion, my holy mountain." (Psalm 2:1-6)
Then the Psalmist concludes:
"Therefore, you kings, be wise;
be warned, you rulers of the earth.
Serve the Lord with fear
and celebrate his rule with trembling.
Kiss his son, or he will be angry
and your way will lead to your destruction,
for his wrath can flare up in a moment.
Blessed are all who take refuge in him." (Psalm 2:10-12)

Psalm 3 is about deliverance. This Psalm is traditionally ascribed to David, who learned many life lessons about deliverance. This deliverance can come from earthly foes, from enemy armies, from disease, from the terrors of mental illness, or from any of the vast variety of ills that afflict us all. The Psalmist assures us, the worshippers, that God is the True Deliverer:

"Lord, how many are my foes!
How many rise up against me!
Many are saying of me,
"God will not deliver him."
But you, Lord, are a shield around me,
my glory, the One who lifts my head high.
I call out to the Lord,
and he answers me from his holy mountain." (Psalm 3:1-4). Then the Psalmist concludes:

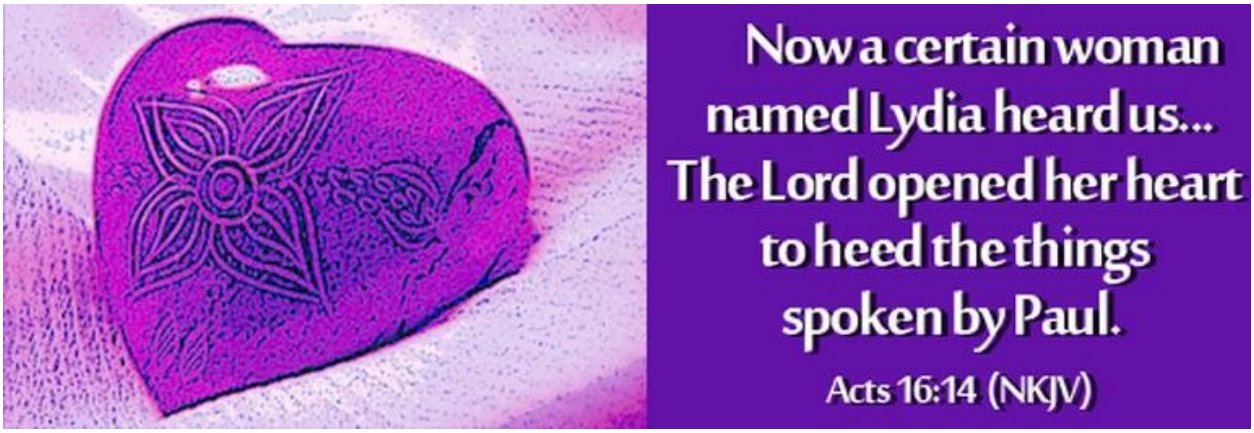
"From the LORD comes deliverance.
May your blessing be on your people." (Psalm 3:8)

Acts 16:1-15

The prejudice of the Jews against "non Jewish" Christians or Gentiles in general was a very serious and limitng factor in the spread of the gospel. When Paul chose Timothy to be his helper in Lystra, Paul had Timothy circumcised because it was well known that Timothy's father was Greek: *"Paul came to Derbe and then to Lystra, where a disciple named Timothy lived, whose mother was Jewish and a believer but whose father was a Greek. The believers at Lystra and Iconium spoke well of him. Paul wanted to take him along on the journey, so he circumcised him because of the Jews who lived in that area, for they all knew that his father was a Greek. As they traveled from town to town, they delivered the decisions reached by the apostles and elders in Jerusalem for the people to obey. So the churches were strengthened in the faith and grew daily in numbers."* (Acts 16:1-5) Would the church have "grown in numbers", or grown in the same numbers if Timothy had not been circumcised? The Scripture gives us guidance at this point- we are to exercise Christian freedom, but not in a way that causes a stumbling block for unbelievers- Jewish or not! (http://www.gotquestions.org/stumbling-block.html) (Matthew 18:8, Romans 14:13)

It is very clear that Paul was led by the Spirit to thiose places wher he could have an effective witness and ministry. In this section of Acts 16 we see two events that attest to this: 1) in Acts 16:6 where Pual was prevented by the Spirit from traveling to provinces of Asia; and 2) in Acts 16:9-10 in which a vision of the Man from Macedonia is the Spirit's way of urging Paul to go to Macedonia. So we, as Paul, must be sensitive to the leadings of the Spirit- both places we should and should not go…my temptation is always to "rush ahead"!

Then we see a remarkable event- a tribute to the godliness and leadership of a Christian woman. In this male dominated culture, it was rare to find praise and admiration for a woman's gifts or leadership, but the example of Lydia is a wonderful one showing theat God is, after all, "not a respector of persons" (Acts 10:34; Romans 2:11) When Paul went to Phillipi he expected to find a synagogue, but instead was surprised by God: *"On the Sabbath we went outside the city gate to the river, where we expected to find a place of prayer. We sat down and began to speak to the women who had gathered there. One of those listening was a woman from the city of Thyatira named Lydia, a dealer in purple cloth. She was a worshiper of God. The Lord opened her heart to respond to Paul's message. When she and the members of her household were baptized, she invited us to her home. "If you consider me a believer in the Lord," she said, "come and stay at my house." And she persuaded us."* (Acts 16:13-15)



Psalms 4-6 **July 11, 2014** **Acts 16:16-40**

These three Psalms all all attributed to David. Since God Himself declared David as a "man after my own heart" (Acts 13:22), it is certainly worthwhile to examine David's heart. David reveals his heart to us as he struggles, suffers, prays, is encouraged, and experiences both triumph and tragedy in his life before His God. Some Christians puzzle over the Psalms- they simply don't expect the raw emotion and passion expressed in these Scriptures. Once again, the Scriptures are an accurate and unvarnished reflection of the real lives, struggles and triumphs of real people! We find such emotion and passion in these three Psalms of David.

Psalm 4 is a heartfelt cry for relief- David asks God to hear his cries for relief:

"*Answer me when I call to you,*
my righteous God.
Give me relief from my distress;
have mercy on me and hear my prayer." (Psalm 4:1)

David knows that God will answer- from David's own experience in petitioning his God! Even though the people turn "glory into shame" (verse 2), God will have the final say in all matters. David rejoices in this as he expresses his confidence in God's protection:

"In peace I will lie down and sleep,

for you alone, Lord,

make me dwell in safety." (Psalm 4:8)

Psalm 5 is also a cry for help and relief, and in Psalm 5 we see a description and contrast between the enemies of David (and God) and the righteous:

"Not a word from their mouth can be trusted;

their heart is filled with malice.

Their throat is an open grave;

with their tongues they tell lies.

Declare them guilty, O God!
Let their intrigues be their downfall.
Banish them for their many sins,
for they have rebelled against you." (Psalm 5:9-10)

The righteous are surrounded by God's protection and favor:

"But let all who take refuge in you be glad;
let them ever sing for joy.
Spread your protection over them,
that those who love your name may rejoice in you.
Surely, Lord, you bless the righteous;
you surround them with your favor as with a shield." (Psalm 5:11-12)

Psalm 6 is a heartfelt cry for mercy and deliverance. David asks God for mercy and forgiveness, not judgment and wrath. David knows that he is a sinner, yet he turns to his God for relief, blessing and reassurance:

"LORD, do not rebuke me in your anger
or discipline me in your wrath.
Have mercy on me, LORD, for I am faint;
heal me, LORD, for my bones are in agony.
My soul is in deep anguish.
How long, LORD, how long?
Turn, LORD, and deliver me;
save me because of your unfailing love.
Among the dead no one proclaims your name.
Who praises you from the grave?
I am worn out from my groaning.
All night long I flood my bed with weeping
and drench my couch with tears.
My eyes grow weak with sorrow;
they fail because of all my foes." (Psalm 6:1-7)

David is saying, "Don't kill me,Lord, because then I couldn't praise you!". This is one of the several Psalms that I prayed (and cried) through during my divorce. I was so hearbroken that the love of my life would leave me, both physically and emotionally…only God could comfort me and give me hope for a better tomorrow! The Psalm ends in triumph- David knows that God will triumph over his enemies:

"Away from me, all you who do evil,

for the Lord has heard my weeping.

The Lord has heard my cry for mercy;

the Lord accepts my prayer.

All my enemies will be overwhelmed with shame and anguish;

they will turn back and suddenly be put to shame." (Psalm 6:8-10)

Acts 16:16-40

This is perhaps my favorite chapter in all of Acts. The verse 25 statement: *"About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the other prisoners were listening to them."* (Acts 16:25) is the basis for a sermon I have preached twice entitled "Your Midnight Hour". In this sermon I make the point that the "midnight hour" is a point in time both of ending and beginning. The night gives way to a new day, and we who are sometimes ensnared in guilt, sin and shame can look to a new day- a day in which God is in control and holds the future- and our particular future- in His loving hands!

Just look at the situation depicted here- Paul and Silas were thrown in prison for "casting out a demon" from a slave girl, who had been bringing her owners a lucrative income stream. They were imprisoned- but were singing- and expecting God to act. And He did- in a mighty was. There was an earthquake, and the prison doors were opened and chains released. The jailer was at the point of suicide, but Paul reassured him: *"The jailer woke up, and when he saw the prison doors open, he drew his sword and was about to kill himself because he thought the prisoners had escaped. But Paul shouted, "Don't harm yourself! We are all here!" The jailer called for lights, rushed in and fell trembling before Paul and Silas. He then brought them out and asked, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?"* (Acts 16:27-30). God used this "near prison break" to bring a jailer and his entire family into a saving relationship with Jesus!

There was joy in heaven and joy in the jailer's household: "The jailer brought them into his house and set a meal before them; he was filled with joy because he had come to believe in God—he and his whole household." (Acts 16:34) When the authorities found out that paul was a Roman citizen, and had been wrongly imprisoned, they were afraid of the consequences. Paul, ever on the alert for opportunities to be an encouragement and a positive leader, used this situation to his advantage and managed to arrange a meeting with Lydia, a meeting in which Paul offered the family of believers encouragement: *"The officers reported this to the magistrates, and when they heard that Paul and Silas were Roman citizens, they were alarmed. They came to appease them and escorted them from the prison, requesting them to leave the city. After Paul and Silas came out of the prison, they went to Lydia's house, where they met with the brothers and sisters and encouraged them. Then they left."* (Acts 16:38-40) So Paul left, when the time was right, to travel again and to preach, teach and start and nurture new churches- the Gospel was moving rapidly and bearing much fruit!

Psalm 10-12 July 13, 2014 Acts 17:16-34

Psalm 10 is a detailed description of the attitudes and attitudes of a wicked man, who pridefully states:

“Nothing will ever shake me.”

He swears, “No one will ever do me harm.” (Psalm 10:6b), and later:

“God will never notice;

he covers his face and never sees.” (Psalm 10:11b)

This man plots against the helpless and the weak, and:

“boasts about the cravings of his heart;

he blesses the greedy and reviles the Lord.” (Psalm 10:3b). He makes no room in his life or heart for God, and amazingly is prosperous- for a time:

“In his pride the wicked man does not seek him;

in all his thoughts there is no room for God.

His ways are always prosperous;

your laws are rejected by him;

he sneers at all his enemies.” (Psam 10:4-5)

Yet the Psalmist does not give up hope- he trusts that God will protect and defend those who are victims of this prideful and wicked man, and that justice will be established once again:

“Arise, Lord! Lift up your hand, O God.

Do not forget the helpless.

Why does the wicked man revile God?

Why does he say to himself,

“He won’t call me to account”?

But you, God, see the trouble of the afflicted;

you consider their grief and take it in hand.

The victims commit themselves to you;

you are the helper of the fatherless.

Break the arm of the wicked man;

call the evildoer to account for his wickedness

that would not otherwise be found out.” (Psalm 10:12-15)

And God will triumph and justice will be established in His land:

“The Lord is King for ever and ever;

the nations will perish from his land.

You, Lord, hear the desire of the afflicted;

you encourage them, and you listen to their cry,

defending the fatherless and the oppressed,

so that mere earthly mortals

will never again strike terror." (Psalm 10:16-18)

Psalms 11 and 12 are attributed to David. In Psalm 11, David is questioning God about apparent injustice and "upside downness" of the world. Even though David trusts God, and knows from experience he can trust Him, there is seemingly always an enemy to deal with who would seek David- and God's people in general- harm:

"In the Lord I take refuge.

How then can you say to me:

"Flee like a bird to your mountain.

For look, the wicked bend their bows;

they set their arrows against the strings

to shoot from the shadows

at the upright in heart.

When the foundations are being destroyed,

what can the righteous do?" (Psalm 11:1-3)

But then the Psalmist-David- concludes that even when things seem wrong and that the wicked rule the earth, that God sees everything- the deepest parts of each heart, and will reward the righteous who "will see His face" and punsh the wicked "with fiery coals":

"The Lord examines the righteous,

but the wicked, those who love violence,

he hates with a passion.

On the wicked he will rain

fiery coals and burning sulfur;

a scorching wind will be their lot.

For the Lord is righteous,

he loves justice;

the upright will see his face." (Psalm 11:5-7)

In Psalm 12, David asks God about the lack of faith, justice and righteousness on the earth. David wonders, as we often do, why there is so much sin and wickedness in the world, and whu those who disregard God and His claims on our lives. David must have wondered when God would act in a mighty way and correct all the evil that seems to dominate everywhere:

"Help, Lord, for no one is faithful anymore;

those who are loyal have vanished from the human race.

Everyone lies to their neighbor;

they flatter with their lips

*but harbor deception in their hearts."(*Psalm 12:1-2)

Then God, as He does so often, gives words of encouragement and acts to correct the prevalent evil that plagues this earth:

"Because the poor are plundered and the needy groan,

I will now arise," says the Lord.

"I will protect them from those who malign them."

And the words of the Lord are flawless,

like silver purified in a crucible,

like gold refined seven times.

You, Lord, will keep the needy safe

and will protect us forever from the wicked,

who freely strut about

when what is vile is honored by the human race." (Psalm 12:5-8).

The fact that "what is vile is honored" seems to be timeless. So many days when I read the newspaper, look at television's reflection of our culture, or scan the Internet, I am reminded of this fact. The more vile and reprehensible and scurrilous, the better! Come Lord Jesus!

Acts 17:16-34

Paul traveled to Athens, and found lots of "religion" there. By "religion" I mean the man made efforts to meet, understand, describe and relate to God. In the case of the city of Athens, the evidence of pervasive religion was the abundance of idols. The presence of idols was an ongoing concern for God's people, from the very beginning. The desire to have a "real object" to worship was very powerful, and the desire to put "anything and everything" at the focus of our attention and effort in place of God is addressed in the very first commandment- 'no other "gods" before (instead or in place of) me"!

Paul's response to this outpouring of "false faith" was interesting and unique. He first commended them on their "faith": "Paul then stood up in the meeting of the Areopagus and said: *"People of Athens! I see that in every way you are very religious. For as I walked around and looked carefully at your objects of worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: to an unknown god. So you are ignorant of the very thing you worship—and this is what I am going to proclaim to you."* (Acts 17:22-23). Paul used the inscription "to an unknown god" to introduce what the Athenians were missing- the true God of the universe.

Why do we insist on idols? A simple answer is that they can be managed by us- we can set our own priorities, do what we want to do, and "be in charge" of our lives and worship only when it suits us. Idols make no real demands, idols don't insist on their own way, idols don't hold us accountable for our sinful disobedience- after all, we can always clean the slate with a good sacrifice or two! And so Paul tries to get the men of Athens to see the truth behind their "accidental truth", and reveals the God they have missed entirely: *"The God who made the world and everything in it is*

the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by human hands. And he is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything. Rather, he himself gives everyone life and breath and everything else. From one man he made all the nations, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he marked out their appointed times in history and the boundaries of their lands. God did this so that they would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from any one of us. 'For in him we live and move and have our being.' As some of your own poets have said, 'We are his offspring.' "Therefore since we are God's offspring, we should not think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone—an image made by human design and skill. In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent. For he has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed. He has given proof of this to everyone by raising him from the dead." (Acts 17:24-31)

Notice that Paul left a huge truth until the end of his statement- that God had proved His plan by raising Jesus from the dead. This statement of truth has always been controversial, and yet it is at the center of the Gospel. Now as then, some believed and were profoundly satisfied, and some did (and do) not: *"When they heard about the resurrection of the dead, some of them sneered, but others said, "We want to hear you again on this subject." At that, Paul left the Council. Some of the people became followers of Paul and believed. Among them was Dionysius, a member of the Areopagus, also a woman named Damaris, and a number of others."* (Acts 17:32-34)

Paul's speech in Athens Artist: UNKNOWN; Illustrator of Caspar Luiken's Writings Date: Published 1712

Psalm 13-16 **July 14, 2014** **Acts 18**

Psalms 13-16 are all attributed to David. David was never very far emotionally from the dangers he faced as a young shepherd or from the pursuit of his enemy Saul. Just as David trusted God for victory and deliverance from these enemies, his psalms give us encouragement and strength to face the adversaries we deal with today. The "bottom line" message in all these psalms is- "God is faithful, God is loving, God will protect and shelter".

Psalm 13 is a cry for "light to my eyes". David feels alone and abandoned by God, similar to the one (and only) time Jesus felt separation from His Father when he bore the crushing weight of the sins of the world while working His great work on the cross "My God, why have you forsaken me..?" (Matthew 27:46). The Psalmist cries out: *"How long, Lord? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me?"* (Psalm 13:1). The answer, though, is not long in coming: *"But I trust in your unfailing love; my heart rejoices in your salvation. I will sing the Lord's praise, for he has been good to me."* (Psalm 13:5-6)

Psalm 14 is often quoted out of context by some who say- the Bible teaches that there is no God! A simple insertion of this phrase into the context of Psalm 14 resolves this "issue" by reading: *"The fool says in his heart, "There is no God." They are corrupt, their deeds are vile; there is no one who does good."* (Psalm 14:1). The Hebrew word rendered "fool" in English actually is an adjective that suggests one who is "morally deficient". The context makes it clear that these persons are corrupt and vile, and that they (almost) never do good. David is bemoaning the lack of faith and trust and God that he sees. Perhaps this was written when David was king and saw endless examples of ungodliness among God's own chosen people. Then David concludes: *"Oh,that salvation for Israel would come out of Zion! When the Lord restores his people, let Jacob rejoice and Israel be glad!"* (Psalm 14:7) Salvation did come out of Zion- where the very Son of God sacrificed himself for all of us.

Who is worthy to commune with God? The correct answer is "none of us"...only God's own Son was "worthy"! Yet David reflects on the purity of heart and motive- he describes the one who is a true lover of God, seeks to please Him in every waking moment, and whose hands are "clean" (Psalm 24:4)- those who seek God (and miracyulously, those who don't) are welcome to God's presence. This is how David describes this one: *"The one whose walk is blameless, who does what is*

righteous, who speaks the truth from their heart; whose tongue utters no slander, who does no wrong to a neighbor, and casts no slur on others; who despises a vile person but honors those who fear the LORD; who keeps an oath even when it hurts, and does not change their mind; who lends money to the poor without interest; who does not accept a bribe against the innocent." (Psalm 15:2-5). This is the one who can: "dwell in your sacred tent" (Psalm 15:1)

Who are we and what do we "have" apart from God? David gives the answer- "nothing". He states this truth in Psalm 16: *"Keep me safe, my God, for in you I take refuge. I say to the Lord, "You are my Lord; apart from you I have no good thing."* (Psalm 16:1-2). The godly enjoy a special relationship and security in their fellowship with God, but the ungodly "run after" other gods: *"Those who run after other gods will suffer more and more. I will not pour out libations of blood to such gods or take up their names on my lips."* (Psalm 16:4). There is great wisdom in this passage- the pursuit of "other gods" is not passive- the ungodly literally "run" to their false gods- and they suffer increasingly as they are consumed in worship and pursuit of these false gods! The psalmist pledges that he will not sacrifice to such as these or even speak their names! The psalmist then rejoices that God is his portion, and that God has a unique and individual "path" for him to take: *"Therefore my heart is glad and my tongue rejoices; my body also will rest secure, because you will not abandon me to the realm of the dead, nor will you let your faithful one see decay. You make known to me the path of life; you will fill me with joy in your presence, with eternal pleasures at your right hand."* (Psalm 16:9-11) Psalm 16:10 is quoted in the New Testament (Acts 2:27; 13:35) - referring to Jesus- the "holy one" (faithful one) who did not see decay- he was not in the tomb long enough!

Acts 18

Triumph and opposition- and then a steady "staying the course"- this was Paul's approach to his ministry. When he was seriously opposed, he moved on- as in Corinth: *"When Silas and Timothy came from Macedonia, Paul devoted himself exclusively to preaching, testifying to the Jews that Jesus was the Messiah. But when they opposed Paul and became abusive, he shook out his clothes in protest and said to them, "Your blood be on your own heads! I am innocent of it. From now on I will go to the Gentiles."* (Acts 18:5-6). Paul may have remembered the teaching of Jesus when He sent out the seventy two (Luke 10:10-12) and told them:

"But when you enter a town and are not welcomed, go into its streets and say, 'Even the dust of your town we wipe from our feet as a warning to you. Yet be sure of this: The kingdom of God has come near.' I tell you, it will be more bearable on that day for Sodom than for that town."

Paul enjoyed the company of Priscilla and Aquila, two fellow "tent makers" who labored with him faithfully in Corinth- just as we enjoy those that God sends in our path to strengthen and encourage us as well. And God faithfully led Paul, appearing to him in a vision that encouraged Paul to stay where he was despite real or perceived dangers: *"One night the Lord spoke to Paul in a vision: "Do not be afraid; keep on speaking, do not be silent. For I am with you, and no one is going to attack and harm you, because I have many people in this city." So Paul stayed in Corinth for a year and a half, teaching them the word of God."* (Acts 18:9-11). As if to confirm God's direction- which never needs confirmation- the "united attack" on Paul by some of the Corinthian Jews failed miserable- the Roman proconsul Gallio would not consider their "case" against Paul (Acts 18:12-16)

Paul then left for Syria, accompanied by Priscilla and Aquila, and had a successful ministry of encouragement and preaching there and in Ephesus and Antioch. While in Ephesus, Paul gained another ally- Apollos. This man was well versed about Jesus, but *"knew only the baptism of John."* (Acts 18:25b). Paul and his companions instructed Apollos and added to his knowledge: *"When Priscilla and Aquila heard him, they invited him to their home and explained to him the way of God more adequately."* (Acts 18:26b). When equipped with the Truth, the faithful always become more powerful and persuasive in their teaching and ministry! Acts 18 testifies to the effectiveness of this "newly equipped" witness: *"When Apollos wanted to go to Achaia, the brothers and sisters encouraged him and wrote to the disciples there to welcome him. When he arrived, he was a great help to those who by grace had believed. For he vigorously refuted his Jewish opponents in public debate, proving from the Scriptures that Jesus was the Messiah."* (Acts 18:27-28)

Psalm 17-18 July 15, 2014 Acts 19:1-20

We can learn much from the prayers of others. In prayer we can- and sometimes do- eveal the true desires of our hearts. Our trust and belief is that God hears and

understands, and will judge us only to correct us as His beloved children. This is the manner that David prayed to his God:

"Hear me, Lord, my plea is just;
listen to my cry.
Hear my prayer—
it does not rise from deceitful lips.
Let my vindication come from you;
may your eyes see what is right.
Though you probe my heart,
though you examine me at night and test me,
you will find that I have planned no evil;
my mouth has not transgressed.
Though people tried to bribe me,
I have kept myself from the ways of the violent
through what your lips have commanded.
My steps have held to your paths;
my feet have not stumbled.
I call on you, my God, for you will answer me;
turn your ear to me and hear my prayer.
Show me the wonders of your great love,
you who save by your right hand
those who take refuge in you from their foes.
Keep me as the apple of your eye;
hide me in the shadow of your wings
from the wicked who are out to destroy me,
from my mortal enemies who surround me." (Psalm 17:1-9)

Most of us do not follow God's commands and directives perfectly, but we still have the right and privilege to plead our case before Him. The intimacy of this prayer is seen in the symbolic references to the "apple of your eye" and the "shadow of your wings". David knew the comfort that came from God's watchfulness and pleasure in him, and was eager to experience it again and agin.

David pelads for, and expects God to bring down and thwart "the wicked" and his "mortal enemies" (verse 9), and looks forward to the shelter, favor and protection of his God. David believes that God will triumph and have the final word: *"As for me, I will be vindicated and will see your face; when I awake, I will be satisfied with seeing your likeness."* (Psalm 17:15)

The marginal notes in the Bible are not Scripture, but they do add context and background to the Word and help me to understand the "flavor" of the words as hey are recorded. Such is the case in Psalm 18, another Davidic psalm, in which the NIV marginal notes read: "For the director of music. Of David the servant of the Lord. He sang to the Lord the words of this song when the Lord delivered him from the hand of all his enemies and from the hand of Saul." David pled from Saul a great part of his adult life. He was in fear of the greater numbers and the insanely jealous king who would destroy him, yet David found constant comfort, solace and protection from God. It was as David trusted God that his faith and relationship with Him grew.

Davis speaks of his love for God, and the dramatic ways that God intervened savingly on David's behalf:
"I love you, Lord, my strength.
The Lord is my rock, my fortress and my deliverer;
my God is my rock, in whom I take refuge,
my shield[b] and the horn[c] of my salvation, my stronghold.
I called to the Lord, who is worthy of praise,
and I have been saved from my enemies.
The cords of death entangled me;
the torrents of destruction overwhelmed me.
The cords of the grave coiled around me;
the snares of death confronted me.
In my distress I called to the Lord;
I cried to my God for help.
From his temple he heard my voice;
my cry came before him, into his ears.
The earth trembled and quaked,
and the foundations of the mountains shook;
they trembled because he was angry." (Psalm 18:1-7)
David beilievs that God has heard him, loved him and protected him because God has seen the purity of David's motivation and intentions:
"The Lord has dealt with me according to my righteousness;
according to the cleanness of my hands he has rewarded me.
For I have kept the ways of the Lord;
I am not guilty of turning from my God.
All his laws are before me;
I have not turned away from his decrees.
I have been blameless before him
and have kept myself from sin.
The Lord has rewarded me according to my righteousness,
according to the cleanness of my hands in his sight." (Psalm 18:20-24)
We could certainly have an endless debate as to whether David was greatly overestimating his own righteousness, or whether he was prideful and self righteous. The stgain of sin runs very deep, and David is no more immune to it than we are. Yet God does "see the heart" and helps us build on the goodness we are rtying to capture from God, and to incorporate into our truest selves, and God delights in giving His children great giftf! God gives us mercy rather than justice, and for this I am exceedingly glad!

David praises his God for His righteousness, power and perfection:
"As for God, his way is perfect:
The Lord's word is flawless;
he shields all who take refuge in him.
For who is God besides the Lord?
And who is the Rock except our God?
It is God who arms me with strength
and keeps my way secure.
He makes my feet like the feet of a deer;
he causes me to stand on the heights." (Psalm 18:30-33)

Then David, in conclusion, praises and magnifies his God who gives him victory over his enemies. As always, God uses imperfect people as His tools to accomplish His perfect will:
"The Lord lives! Praise be to my Rock!
Exalted be God my Savior!
He is the God who avenges me,
who subdues nations under me,
who saves me from my enemies.
You exalted me above my foes;
from a violent man you rescued me.
Therefore I will praise you, Lord, among the nations;
I will sing the praises of your name.
He gives his king great victories;
he shows unfailing love to his anointed,
to David and to his descendants forever." (Psalm 18:46-50)

Acts 19:1-20

Paul traveled to Ephesus and found an amzing thing- there were a number of beilievers who had been baptized by "John's baptism", the baptism of repentance. Certainly this was a significant step, and for a time was the only baptism available. However, when Jeus started His public ministry, He was baptized by the very Sprit of God, and after Pentecost, many believers were baptized into the Spirit, receiving the Spirit as God's perfect and powerful gift. These believers were not even aware of the "other" baptism, so Paul immediately laid hands on them, and they received the indescribably wonderful gift of the Spirit!: *"Paul said, "John's baptism was a baptism of repentance. He told the people to believe in the one coming after him, that is, in Jesus." On hearing this, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. When Paul placed his hands on them, the Holy Spirit came on them, and they spoke in tongues and prophesied. There were about twelve men in all."* (Acts 19:4-7)

Then comes a passage of Scripture that has-in my opinion- been misinterpreted and misrepresented. The Scripture is very clear and straightforward: *God did extraordinary miracles through Paul, so that even handkerchiefs and aprons that had touched him were taken to the sick, and their illnesses were cured and the evil spirits left them."* (Acts 19:11-12)
One commentator calls this the "Handkerchief Phenomenon" (http://www.deceptioninthechurch.com/handkerchiefs.html). One of the problems of applying this Scripture to modern times is that the very purpose of the miracles was to attest to the reality and power of God and the truth of the Sonship of Jesus Christ. Simply expecting a "miraculous blessing" from a handkerchief, or any similar object, borders on "Christian magic"!

One testimony to the dangers of mis application of God's precious Spirit is seen in the verses following these. Some Jewish "beilievers" tried to invoke the Name of Jesus in healing the sick and cating out demons. The results were not pretty: *"They would say, "In the name of the Jesus whom Paul preaches, I command you to come out." Seven sons of Sceva, a Jewish chief priest, were doing this. One day the evil spirit answered them, "Jesus I know, and Paul I know about, but who are you?" Then the man who had the evil spirit jumped on them and overpowered them all. He gave*

them such a beating that they ran out of the house naked and bleeding." (Acts 19:13-16)

A wonderful result came from this "mis-application"- a number of sorcerers burned their (very valuable) books of magic and the Word of God was spread to even more who believed. The truth and power of the Name of Jesus has always been a powerful force in the lives of men- as it was here: *"When this became known to the Jews and Greeks living in Ephesus, they were all seized with fear, and the name of the Lord Jesus was held in high honor. Many of those who believed now came and openly confessed what they had done. A number who had practiced sorcery brought their scrolls together and burned them publicly. When they calculated the value of the scrolls, the total came to fifty thousand drachmas. In this way the word of the Lord spread widely and grew in power."* (Acts 19:17-20)

Psalm 19-21 July 16, 2014 Acts 19:21-41

Some eight years ago I started a "ministry of devotion and encouragement" called the Sunrise Group. Each working day I sent (and still send) a Scripture and photo- usually one I have taken- which are a testimony to what Psalm 19 is describing in verses 1-2:

"The heavens declare the glory of God;
the skies proclaim the work of his hands.
Day after day they pour forth speech;
night after night they reveal knowledge." (Psalm 29:1-2)

One of the earliest "Sunrise" photos follows:

May 5,2006 Sunrise Photo/Scripture

Today the group has reached 100 members. My prayer was that as God had inspired me so many times with the beauty and variety of a sunruise, that the combination of this depiction of God's handowork and His Word would be a source of encouragement, and an aid to a morning devotional. My skill a a photographer may not be my greatest gift, but the Word certainly is "great material" and cannot be improved on.

The heavens(and so many other things awaiting our discovery) do indeed declare the glory of God. The Psalmist (David) then goes on to describe the majesty, power and perfection of God's Word:

"The law of the Lord is perfect,
refreshing the soul.
The statutes of the Lord are trustworthy,
making wise the simple.
The precepts of the Lord are right,
giving joy to the heart.
The commands of the Lord are radiant,
giving light to the eyes.
The fear of the Lord is pure,
enduring forever.
The decrees of the Lord are firm,

and all of them are righteous.
They are more precious than gold,
than much pure gold;
they are sweeter than honey,
than honey from the honeycomb.
By them your servant is warned;
in keeping them there is great reward." (Psalm 19:7-11)

The language (and subject) here are parallel to the majestic Psalm 119, an acrostic poem that explores the authority, utility and power of God's Word. Some scholars attribute the authorship of Psalm 119 to David (http://vesomsechel.blogspot.com/2006/11/who-wrote-psalm-119.html), which is a tribute to the common characteristics seen in both these beautiful poems/song. The Psalmist reflects on God's Word as a "firm" foundation, and "enduring" and "precious"- insights that have been gaibed by years of trusting the Lord for everything.

The psalmimst then reflects on the deceptiveness of the heart and the illusion of righteousness that sometimes follows, a hheme that was explored in the book of Job. The "hidden faults" are sometimes hidden from us, and the psalmist asks God to remove them and keep these sins away from him:

"But who can discern their own errors?
Forgive my hidden faults.
Keep your servant also from willful sins;
may they not rule over me.
Then I will be blameless,
innocent of great transgression.
May these words of my mouth and this meditation of my heart
be pleasing in your sight,
Lord, my Rock and my Redeemer." (Psalm 19:12-14)

Psalm 20 is a collection of intercessory prayers for another believer. The structure of part A of this psalm is "may the Lord (answer you/send you help/remember all your sacrifices/give you the desire of your heart (Psalm 37:4)" and then ends with "May we shout for joy over your victory":

"May the Lord answer you when you are in distress;
may the name of the God of Jacob protect you.
May he send you help from the sanctuary
and grant you support from Zion.
May he remember all your sacrifices
and accept your burnt offerings.[d]
May he give you the desire of your heart
and make all your plans succeed.
May we shout for joy over your victory
and lift up our banners in the name of our God.
May the Lord grant all your requests." (Psalm 20:1-5)

The Psalminst then states what he knows to be true- that the Lord gives "victory to His anointed". The climax of this psalm/song is found in verse 7:

"Some trust in chariots and some in horses,
*but we trust in the name of the Lord our God."(*Psalm 20:7)

This trust only comes from an experience of the mercy, power and justice of the living Lord.

The “king” referred to in Psalm 21 seems at first reading to be a hypothetical king, a “generic king”. After relection and reading other Scriptures about King David, it becomes clear that David is reflecting on the experience that he uniquely has had, and attributing all that is good, powerful and right to his God:

“The king rejoices in your strength, Lord.
How great is his joy in the victories you give!
You have granted him his heart’s desire
and have not withheld the request of his lips.[f]
You came to greet him with rich blessings
and placed a crown of pure gold on his head.
He asked you for life, and you gave it to him—
length of days, for ever and ever.
Through the victories you gave, his glory is great;
you have bestowed on him splendor and majesty.
Surely you have granted him unending blessings
and made him glad with the joy of your presence.
For the king trusts in the Lord;
through the unfailing love of the Most High
he will not be shaken.” (Psalm 21:1-7)

A descrition follows of the character and attributes of God- in particular His power and righteousness:

“Your hand will lay hold on all your enemies;
your right hand will seize your foes.
When you appear for battle,
you will burn them up as in a blazing furnace.
The Lord will swallow them up in his wrath,
and his fire will consume them.
You will destroy their descendants from the earth,
their posterity from mankind.
Though they plot evil against you
and devise wicked schemes, they cannot succeed.
You will make them turn their backs
when you aim at them with drawn bow.” (Psalm 20:8-12)

The psalm concludes with a ststement of praise:

“Be exalted in your strength, Lord;
we will sing and praise your might.” (Psalm 20:13)

Acts 19:21-41

Paul went to Jerusalem, passing on his way through the provinces of Asia. It was his desire then to go to Rome. Paul’s last journey on this earth, it would turn out, would be to Rome. He never realized his dream to go to Spain and nearby countries. God was in control of his journey, however haphazard and “unplanned” they might seem to an outside observer.

While in Ephesus (in the “province of Asia”), a riot broke out. The motivation and root cause for this riot should be familiar to all of us- money. We are told elsewhere

in Scripture (1 Timothy 6:10) that the “love of money” is the root of all evil (not money itself- it is a commodity). This incident, therefore, should not shock or surprise us very much. The silversmiths at Ephesus were accustomed to making money from the production of silver “statues” or representations of the goddess Artemis. The story went that Artemis’ image had “dropped” from heaven and a Temple had been constructed to honor her “special visitation” to this city: *”The city clerk quieted the crowd and said: “Fellow Ephesians, doesn’t all the world know that the city of Ephesus is the guardian of the temple of the great Artemis and of her image, which fell from heaven?”* (Acts 19:35). Paul was seen as a threat to this moneyh making trade: *”About that time there arose a great disturbance about the Way. A silversmith named Demetrius, who made silver shrines of Artemis, brought in a lot of business for the craftsmen there. He called them together, along with the workers in related trades, and said: “You know, my friends, that we receive a good income from this business. And you see and hear how this fellow Paul has convinced and led astray large numbers of people here in Ephesus and in practically the whole province of Asia. He says that gods made by human hands are no gods at all. There is danger not only that our trade will lose its good name, but also that the temple of the great goddess Artemis will be discredited; and the goddess herself, who is worshiped throughout the province of Asia and the world, will be robbed of her divine majesty.”(*Acts 19:23-27)

Interestingly, it was clear that the accusations made against Paul were groundless, for the city official simply told them to “calm down” and take their case to court: *“Therefore, since these facts are undeniable, you ought to calm down and not do anything rash. You have brought these men here, though they have neither robbed temples nor blasphemed our goddess. If, then, Demetrius and his fellow craftsmen have a grievance against anybody, the courts are open and there are proconsuls. They can press charges. If there is anything further you want to bring up, it must be settled in a legal assembly. As it is, we are in danger of being charged with rioting because of what happened today. In that case we would not be able to account for this commotion, since there is no reason for it.” After he had said this, he dismissed the assembly.”* (Acts 19:36-41). It never ceases to amaze me how God can use “secular” people to accomplish His purposes. In this case, Paul’s character and integrity were so obvious to the civil authorities that they saw through the false charges and restored order- a testimony to God’s power as expressed through His servant Paul. May our witness to the character and majesty of God always be so clear!

Psalm 22-24 July 17, 2014 Acts 20:1-16

What does the believer do when things seem dark and bleak, and God seems far away and uncaring? If we are to follow the example of David, we too will cry out to God, pleading with Him to bless us and revive us with His presence:
“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?
Why are you so far from saving me,
so far from my cries of anguish?
My God, I cry out by day, but you do not answer,
by night, but I find no rest.” (Psam 22:1-2)
Then the psalmist/David realizes that God has always been a help in times of need, and that he literally made us:

“Yet you brought me out of the womb;
you made me trust in you, even at my mother’s breast.
From birth I was cast on you;
from my mother’s womb you have been my God.
Do not be far from me,
for trouble is near
and there is no one to help.” (Psalm 22:9-11)

David realizes that “there is no one to help” other than the God he has learned to love and trust, and depend on for protection and provision. The other issue that David- and all of us- faces is that our feelings don’t define us and they are not reality. One of my favorite- and wisest- sayings is that “feelings aren’t facts”. We feel lost, lonely and confused- and that is our reality. The fact is that God has promised never to leave or forsake us- whether we “feel” loved and surrounded by His presence or not!

The psalimist goes through a transition of his feelings, and ends this psalm with praise for the triumphant reality of God:

“The poor will eat and be satisfied;
those who seek the Lord will praise him—
may your hearts live forever!
All the ends of the earth
will remember and turn to the Lord,
and all the families of the nations
will bow down before him,
for dominion belongs to the Lord
and he rules over the nations.
All the rich of the earth will feast and worship;
all who go down to the dust will kneel before him—
those who cannot keep themselves alive.
Posterity will serve him;
future generations will be told about the Lord.
They will proclaim his righteousness,
declaring to a people yet unborn:
He has done it!” (Psalm 22:26-31).

“All the ends of the earth”- everyone- will remember the goodness and power and saving grace of the Lord!

Plsam 23 in the King James translation os perhaps the most beloved, the most memorized and treasured of all the psalms. It is read often at funerals, sometimes at weddings, and has stood the test of years as an enduringly beautiful poem to the transforming presence and care of God. God’s image here is that of the shepherd, who knows, loves and cares for his flock and would lay down his life for them. This image has resonated with believers everywhere, even if they never have beeb close to sheep!

The psalmist attests that because God is that Good Shepherd- he will not want- will not be lacking any good thing. It is the purpose and calling of the shepherd to provide safety, protection from all enemies, and guidance and direction:

The Lord is my shepherd, I lack nothing.
He makes me lie down in green pastures,
he leads me beside quiet waters,

he refreshes my soul.
He guides me along the right paths
for his name's sake.(Psalm 23:1-3)
When the storms of life- illness, abandonment, financial upheavals, and the like- come, as they always do, the psalmist will not be consumed with fear. He has learned from life experience that the Shepherd will, protect, comfort, and bind up his wounds whether they be physical, emotional, or spiritual:
"Even though I walk
through the darkest valley,[g]
I will fear no evil,
for you are with me;
your rod and your staff,
*they comfort me."(*Psalm 23:4)
The Psalmist then declares that God will "anoint" him- mark him as one of the chosen ones- even when enemies are near and threaten to disrupt or destroy the fellowship the psalmist has known:
"You prepare a table before me
in the presence of my enemies.
You anoint my head with oil;
my cup overflows.
Surely your goodness and love will follow me
all the days of my life,
and I will dwell in the house of the Lord
forever." (Psalm 23:5-6)
Instead of fear there is protecting, surrounding love and anointing- God claims His children and loves them "all the days" of their lives- and forever!

Who is truly worthy to be in the very presence of God? The psalmist answers this in a familiar way- the one who has lived a righteous and God loving life. The evidence for this lifestyle is "clean hands and a pure heart". After all, everything ultimately belongs to, and is the ultimate control of our God:

"The earth is the LORD's, and everything in it,

the world, and all who live in it;

for he founded it on the seas

and established it on the waters.

Who may ascend the mountain of the LORD?

Who may stand in his holy place?

The one who has clean hands and a pure heart,

who does not trust in an idol

or swear by a false god." (Psalm 24:1-4)

Lift up your heads, you gates! This triumphant Scripture has been captured in spirit by the masterpiece "The Messiah". George Frederik Handel was inspired by this triumphant psalm to write glorious music in tribute to the "King of Glory- mighty in battle" (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hyBeGDwHYKc)
The end of Psalm 24 reads like this:

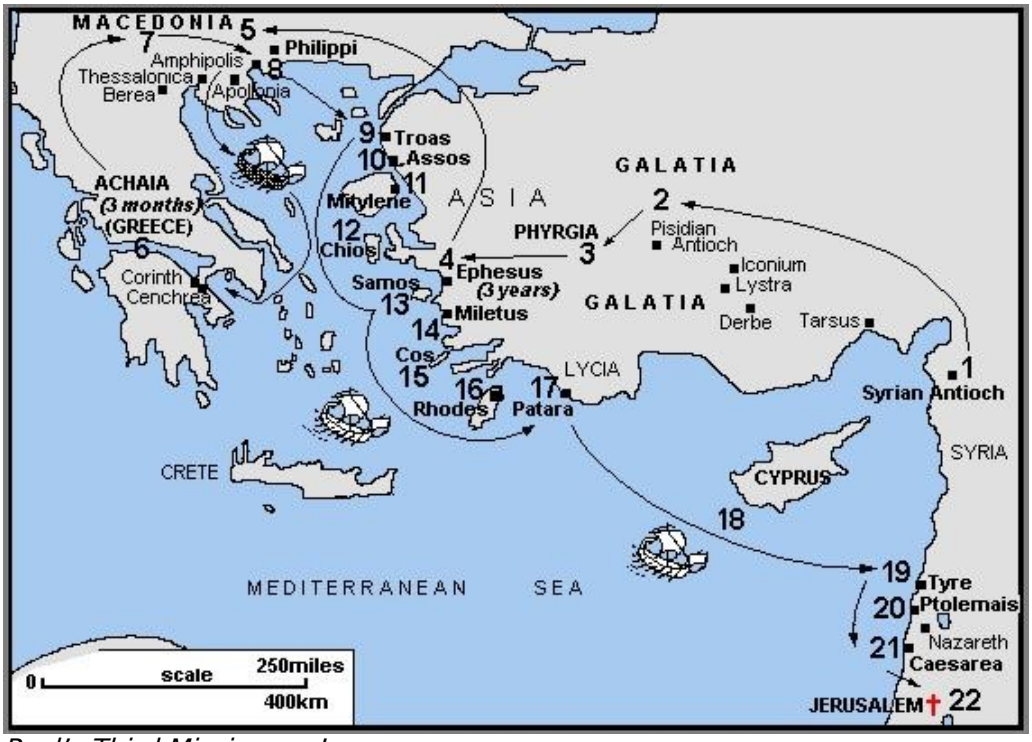
“Lift up your heads, you gates;
    be lifted up, you ancient doors,
    that the King of glory may come in.
8 Who is this King of glory?
    The Lord strong and mighty,
    the Lord mighty in battle.
9 Lift up your heads, you gates;
    lift them up, you ancient doors,
    that the King of glory may come in.
10 Who is he, this King of glory?
    The Lord Almighty—
    he is the King of glory.” (Psalm 24:7-10)
The Lord is seen as a victorious leader in battle, one for whom the gates must be “lifted up” to receive this triumphamt warrior!

Acts 20:1-16

Paul traveled through Greece and into Macedonia, where he met still more opposition. The Jews were generally resentful rather than eager to hear God’s “new” Word, so it is not surprising that this Jewish opposition cut Paul’s visit short: *“He traveled through that area, speaking many words of encouragement to the people, and finally arrived in Greece, where he stayed three months. Because some Jews had plotted against him just as he was about to sail for Syria, he decided to go back through Macedonia.”* (Acts 20:2-3)

In Troas we see the first story of someone falling asleep during a long sermon. A young man was sitting near a third floor window, fell asleep and feel out the window and was “picked up for dead”. This was another opportunity for Paul to show the power of the Spirit, as he “fell” on the young man and brought him back to life: *“Seated in a window was a young man named Eutychus, who was sinking into a deep sleep as Paul talked on and on. When he was sound asleep, he fell to the ground from the third story and was picked up dead. Paul went down, threw himself on the young man and put his arms around him. “Don’t be alarmed,” he said. “He’s alive!” Then he went upstairs again and broke bread and ate. After talking until daylight, he left. The people took the young man home alive and were greatly comforted.”* (Acts 20:9-12). You can almost hear the people saying: “Did you hear about Euthychus? Paul brought him back to life!” What a testimony to the power of the Spirit!

Paul then bid farewell to the leaders of the church at Ephesus, a church that Paul started, nurtured, and prayed for often. The farewell was tearful, for none of the parting knew if they would see each other on the earth again*: “Paul had decided to sail past Ephesus to avoid spending time in the province of Asia, for he was in a hurry to reach Jerusalem, if possible, by the day of Pentecost.”* (Acts 20:16). However, even though Paul did not land at Ephesus, he sent for the elders from Miletus, where he was staying temporarily.



Paul's Third Missionary Journey
(https://www.ccel.org/bible/phillips/CN245ACTSPaulsReturn.htm)

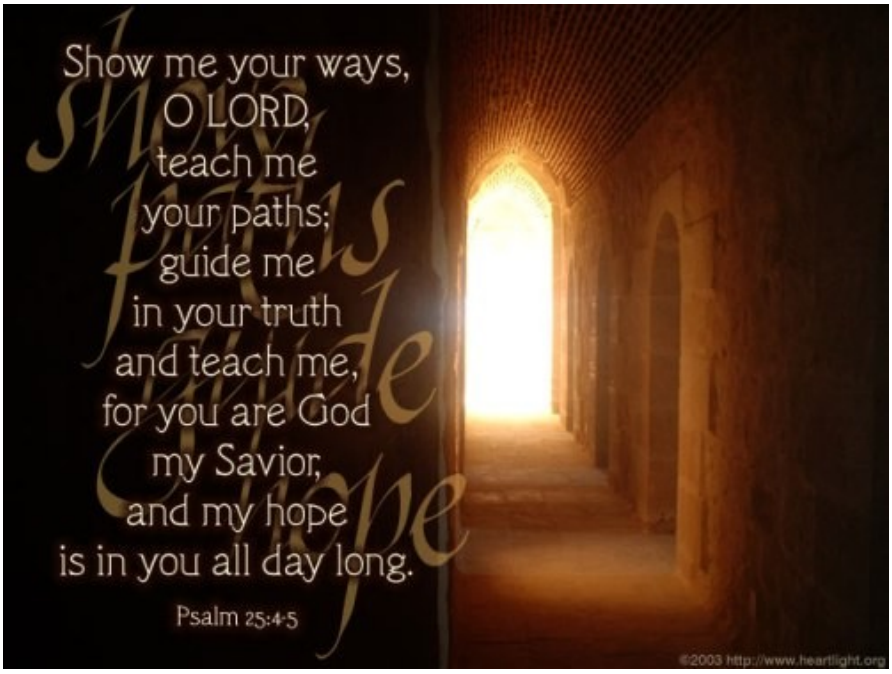
Psalm 25-27 July 18, 2014 Acts 20:17-38

It was September 2001, only a week or so after the horrific event that redefined the America I know- 9/11/2001. I had signed up to attend a weekend Walk to Emmaus, and was doubting if any of us could focus on God's presence and receive a blessing fom Him when everyone was still reeling from the events of that day. God showed up in a remarkable way that weekend- and used our insecurities and fears to be put aside as we focused on Him as the source of peace and strength. The verse of that weekend was Psalm 25:4 "*Show me your ways, LORD,*
teach me your paths." It was truly amazing how the theme "Paths" resonated with us that weekend. God had a unique opportunity to speak to all of us- leaders and "pilgrims" alike- and to assure us that he had a path- a wonderful path- that he had uniquely created for each of us. Our task was to joyfully discover that path and walk on it with Him as our ever present Leader, Guide and Friend! It was on that weekend that I embarked on the Bible Reading Plan that ultimately led to this journal.

God continued to show His goodness to the Psalmist as Savior and Teacher:
"Guide me in your truth and teach me,
for you are God my Savior,
and my hope is in you all day long.
Remember, Lord, your great mercy and love,
for they are from of old.
Do not remember the sins of my youth
and my rebellious ways;
according to your love remember me,

for you, Lord, are good." (Psalm 25:5-7)

The wonderful news is that God does not "remember" our confessed and "repented of" sins- they are removed from His memory. We have that habit of carrying them around and still feeling guilt for them, but He does not! Later in the Psalms we see this wonderful verse: *"...as far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us."* (Psalm 103:12) We miss much of the power and joy of the Chrstian walk if we don't claim this verse daily!
What kind of life does God provide to those who love Him? The psalmist answers:
"Who, then, are those who fear the Lord?
He will instruct them in the ways they should choose.
They will spend their days in prosperity,
and their descendants will inherit the land.
The Lord confides in those who fear him;
he makes his covenant known to them.
My eyes are ever on the Lord,
for only he will release my feet from the snare." (Psalm 25 12-15)
The Psalmist, like us, is in need of protection and refuge, and he makes his plea to God:
"Guard my life and rescue me;
do not let me be put to shame,
for I take refuge in you.
May integrity and uprightness protect me,
because my hope, LORD, is in you." (Psalm 25:20-21)



Vindication...this is what so many of us want. Validation from the Lord Himself that we are His, that we are members of His royal family, that we are children of the King! David asked his God for that validation- and needed assurance that he was

God's child- now and always. I am certain that God heard David's prayer and song/psalm that made this request.

David starts out:
"Vindicate me, Lord,
for I have led a blameless life;
I have trusted in the Lord
and have not faltered.
Test me, Lord, and try me,
examine my heart and my mind;
for I have always been mindful of your unfailing love
and have lived in reliance on your faithfulness.
I do not sit with the deceitful,
nor do I associate with hypocrites.
I abhor the assembly of evildoers
and refuse to sit with the wicked.
I wash my hands in innocence,
and go about your altar, Lord,
proclaiming aloud your praise
and telling of all your wonderful deeds." (Psalm 26:1-7)

We must walk a fine line here. Certainly we can always find those that are less "godly" or righteous" than we are- yet our righteousness is ultimately what Paul described as "filthy rags" (Isaiah 64:6; Romans 3:10) We can rightly claim righteousness- but ultimately it is God's righteousness that we are claiming, and not any "righteousness" if our own. To me at least, one of the greatest traps and pitfalls of my walk has been the twin sins of pride and "self-righteousness". God has had to deal with me many times about my desire to be "in control" and to be the final authority in my life and resources. I thank Him every day for His gentle (and sometimes not so gentle) correction and guidance!

The psalmist concludes:
"I lead a blameless life;
deliver me and be merciful to me.
My feet stand on level ground;
in the great congregation I will praise the Lord." (Psalm 25:11-12)
Again, the reason that the psalmist is "blameless" is that the very Spirit of God lives within him- and not due to any inherent righteousness of his own. The stain of sin is very deep, and only the cleansing blood of the Savior can remove it!

Strength and comfort in time of need- a sense of belonging and security- these are the fruits of an ongoing and loving relationship with the living God. The psalmist testifies to the comfort and security provided by a loving and caring Father God:

"The LORD is my light and my salvation—
whom shall I fear?
The LORD is the stronghold of my life—
of whom shall I be afraid?

When the wicked advance against me
to devour me,
it is my enemies and my foes
who will stumble and fall.
Though an army besiege me,
my heart will not fear;
though war break out against me,
even then I will be confident.

One thing I ask from the LORD,
this only do I seek:
that I may dwell in the house of the LORD
all the days of my life,
to gaze on the beauty of the LORD
and to seek him in his temple." (Psalm 27:1-4)

The only "thing" that the psalmist asks of God is an opportunity to be in God's house- to enjoy th majesty and beauty of the Creator.

Once again we see the theme of "path"- the path that the Lord leads us in is exactly tailored to us- to our needs, personality and spiritual state. The Lord is a constant protector and defender, and the psalmist pleads with God to be such a constant presence in his life:

"Though my father and mother forsake me,
the Lord will receive me.
Teach me your way, Lord;
lead me in a straight path
because of my oppressors.
Do not turn me over to the desire of my foes,
for false witnesses rise up against me,
spouting malicious accusations.
I remain confident of this:
I will see the goodness of the Lord
in the land of the living.
Wait for the Lord;
be strong and take heart
and wait for the Lord." (Psalm 27:10-14)

The great lesson of "waiting" for the Lord is also expressed here, and the value of truly waiting- and not running ahead- is shown in the results of great blessing and joy. We don't know where we are going…doesn't it make sense to wait on One who does?

Acts 20:17-38

Paul's farewell to the elders and leaders of the church in Ephesus is one of the most touching and personal of the New Testament. Paul's commitment to this church- and all the churches he planted and nurtured- was a real and deep one. He testified to the leaders of the church: *"You know how I lived the whole time I was with you,*

from the first day I came into the province of Asia. I served the Lord with great humility and with tears and in the midst of severe testing by the plots of my Jewish opponents. You know that I have not hesitated to preach anything that would be helpful to you but have taught you publicly and from house to house. I have declared to both Jews and Greeks that they must turn to God in repentance and have faith in our Lord Jesus. "And now, compelled by the Spirit, I am going to Jerusalem, not knowing what will happen to me there. I only know that in every city the Holy Spirit warns me that prison and hardships are facing me. However, I consider my life worth nothing to me; my only aim is to finish the race and complete the task the Lord Jesus has given me—the task of testifying to the good news of God's grace." (Acts 20:18b-24) Everywhere Paul went there were two undeniable realities: 1) the Spirit was already moving ahead of him and preparing hearts to hear and receive the Gospel; 2) there were hardships and opposition present. To Paul, the privilege of working with the Lord in the mission and church planting fields outweighed any hardships or problems that he might face. He went "not knowing" (verse 22) exactly what he was to face, but he knew for sure that the Lord of the Harvest was with him!

Paul warns the leaders of the Ephesian church that "savage wolves" will come among them (verse 29) and that there will be some who will distort the truth (verse 30) in order to "draw away disciples" after them- in other words to start their "own church" witht their "own truth"! This has unfortunately been an ssue since the beginning of the church. Paul alludes to the fact that some preach so as to increase their own wealth, reminding them that he worked while among them to provide his own needs, as well as those with him: *"I have not coveted anyone's silver or gold or clothing. You yourselves know that these hands of mine have supplied my own needs and the needs of my companions. In everything I did, I showed you that by this kind of hard work we must help the weak, remembering the words the Lord Jesus himself said: 'It is more blessed to give than to receive.' "* (Acts 20:33-35)

In a touching scene the Christian brothers embraced and wept, knowing that they would in all likelihood never see each other on this earth again. This is a great testimony to the amazingly strong bonds we forge with each other as we labor together for the Lord: *"When Paul had finished speaking, he knelt down with all of them and prayed. They all wept as they embraced him and kissed him. What grieved them most was his statement that they would never see his face again. Then they accompanied him to the ship."* (Acts 20:36-38)

Psalm 28-30 July 19, 2014 Acts 21:1-14

This is "the pits"- a phrase we sometimes hear in conversation. This phrase has come to mean that whatever we are describing is dark, hurtful, terrifying, hostile, or evil- just like being thrown into a "pit" would be. David praises God for saving him- literally rescuing him- from the perils that he faced as his earthly enemies sourrounded him, hunted him down, and turned numerically superior forces into a "search and destroy" mission against him. Many was the time David narrowly escaped, and gave God the credit for his rescue and salvation!
He pleads with God to be his Rescuer:

"To you, Lord, I call;
you are my Rock,

do not turn a deaf ear to me.
For if you remain silent,
I will be like those who go down to the pit.
Hear my cry for mercy
as I call to you for help,
as I lift up my hands
toward your Most Holy Place." (Psalm 28:1-2)

Then David thanks God sincerely for being his rescuer, his fortress of strength and salvation from those who would do him evil:

"Praise be to the LORD,
for he has heard my cry for mercy

The LORD is my strength and my shield;
my heart trusts in him, and he helps me.
My heart leaps for joy,
and with my song I praise him.

The LORD is the strength of his people,
a fortress of salvation for his anointed one.
Save your people and bless your inheritance;
be their shepherd and carry them forever." (Psalm 28:6-9)

We must be careful to give God the honor and glory due to Him- He is worthy of our praise! David "ascribes" to God some of the remarkable and wonderful qualities that he has experienced in a lifetime of trusting and revering his Creator:

"Ascribe to the LORD, you heavenly beings,
ascribe to the LORD glory and strength.
Ascribe to the LORD the glory due his name;
worship the LORD in the splendor of his holiness." (Psalm 29:1-2)

The David reflects on and praises God for His power and might- David might have ben thinking or meditating on the creation, in which God's voice was the creative force- "God said…let there be light, darkness, and everything that was created" (Genesis 1:3 ff). David says it this way:

"The voice of the Lord is over the waters;
the God of glory thunders,
the Lord thunders over the mighty waters.
The voice of the Lord is powerful;
the voice of the Lord is majestic.
The voice of the Lord breaks the cedars;
the Lord breaks in pieces the cedars of Lebanon.

He makes Lebanon leap like a calf,

Sirion like a young wild ox.

The voice of the Lord strikes

with flashes of lightning.

The voice of the Lord shakes the desert;

the Lord shakes the Desert of Kadesh.

The voice of the Lord twists the oaks

and strips the forests bare.

And in his temple all cry, "Glory!" (Psalm 29:3-9)

Davis then tells us that God is literally "on His throne" forever- He will reign until the end of time, and is literally "outside of time"- for that is His created reality:

"The LORD sits enthroned over the flood;
the LORD is enthroned as King forever.
11 The LORD gives strength to his people;
the LORD blesses his people with peace." (Psalm 29:10-11)

Psalm 30 is a beautifully poetic description of his God literally pulld David up "out of the pit" and saved him from desctruction. The climactic statement in the Psalm is found in verses 4 and 5:

"Sing the praises of the Lord, you his faithful people;

praise his holy name.

For his anger lasts only a moment,

but his favor lasts a lifetime;

weeping may stay for the night,

but rejoicing comes in the morning." (Psalm 30:4-5)

The King James translation uses a different rendering for the word rejoicing- "joy". In the Hebrew the word is "rinnah" which is literally a "shout" of joy or gladness! The KJV reads this wasy: "*For his anger endureth but a moment; in his favour is life: weeping may endure for a night, but joy cometh in the morning."* (Psalm 30;5 KJV)

The psalmist then summarizes his experience, sharing with God- and with us- the indescribable joy of deliverance:

"To you, Lord, I called;
to the Lord I cried for mercy:
"What is gained if I am silenced,
if I go down to the pit?
Will the dust praise you?
Will it proclaim your faithfulness?
Hear, Lord, and be merciful to me;
Lord, be my help."
You turned my wailing into dancing;
you removed my sackcloth and clothed me with joy,
that my heart may sing your praises and not be silent.

Lord my God, I will praise you forever." (Psalm 30:8-12)

Acts 21:1-14

Paul was resolute in his determination to go to Jerusalem. God had laid this on his heart, and there was no way for men to dissuade him. Even when a prophet- such as Agabus here- tried to reason with Paul and highlight the dangers he would face, he was unmoved. The Scripture describes it this way: *"When we heard this, we and the people there pleaded with Paul not to go up to Jerusalem. Then Paul answered, "Why are you weeping and breaking my heart? I am ready not only to be bound, but also to die in Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus." When he would not be dissuaded, we gave up and said, "The Lord's will be done."* (Acts 21;12-14).

Just as in the Garden of Getsthemene, where the Lord Himself made the decision to follow the Father's will "…not my will, but yours.." (Luke 22:42), the final and defining statement was simply "The Lord's will be done". Paul knew that danger, hardship, and perhaps even death awaited him in Jerusalem. He believed with all his "heart, soul, mind and strength" that God had led him to the city of Jerusalem, and that he would be used there to promote the Gospel and somehow further the Kingdom. Nothing else was more important to him- not even the preservation of hid life and safety. Just as Daniel resolutely faced the "den of lions" (Daniel 6:16), Paul resolutely traveled to Jerusalem!

Psalm 31-33 July 20, 2014 Acts 21:15-40

A constant refuge and strength- David found the Lord to be all this and more as he learned over a lifetime to trust and love his God more and more:
"In you, Lord, I have taken refuge;
let me never be put to shame;
deliver me in your righteousness.
Turn your ear to me,
come quickly to my rescue;
be my rock of refuge,
a strong fortress to save me.
Since you are my rock and my fortress,
for the sake of your name lead and guide me.
Keep me free from the trap that is set for me,
for you are my refuge.
Into your hands I commit my spirit;
deliver me, Lord, my faithful God." (Psalm 31:1-5)
Thousands of years later, the Lord Jesus prayed Psalm 31 from the cross:
https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=921 *"In Luke's version of the passion (23:46), Jesus died praying Psalm 31:5: "Father, 'Into your hand I commit my spirit.'" But Luke did not quote the next line, "you have redeemed me, Oh Lord, faithful God." Perhaps the implication is that Jesus committed his spirit into God's hands, no matter what. Jesus never stopped trusting God even when he felt abandoned. It could be that Jesus prayed the whole Psalm from the cross, writes biblical scholar James Limburg. Of course, there is no way to know for sure. But we may faithfully imagine Psalm 31 in the broader context of Holy Week."*

David then turns to the practice of idol worship, which God expressly forbade and listed as the “first commandment”:
“I hate those who cling to worthless idols;
as for me, I trust in the Lord.
I will be glad and rejoice in your love,
for you saw my affliction
and knew the anguish of my soul.
You have not given me into the hands of the enemy
but have set my feet in a spacious place.” (Psalm 31:6-8)

The main thrust of Psalm 31, however, is the please for mercy and respite from one who in distress and surrounded by enemies:
“Be merciful to me, Lord, for I am in distress;
my eyes grow weak with sorrow,
my soul and body with grief.
My life is consumed by anguish
and my years by groaning;
my strength fails because of my affliction,[b]
and my bones grow weak.
Because of all my enemies,
I am the utter contempt of my neighbors
and an object of dread to my closest friends—
those who see me on the street flee from me.
I am forgotten as though I were dead;
I have become like broken pottery.
For I hear many whispering,
“Terror on every side!”
They conspire against me
and plot to take my life.” (Psalm 31:9-13)
I literally prayer my way through the Psalms during the very bitter and contentious divorce that I went through in 1982/3. There were times it seemed that I was alone to fight off the demons of loneliness, depression and a profound sadness and guilt. “How could this be happening?” “Has God abandoned me….will I ever experience joy again?” Thes and many other thoughts (which I attribute to the lying whispers of the evil one) plagued me for weeks and months. The psalmist, and I, triumphed over this evil in the end:
“In my alarm I said,
“I am cut off from your sight!”
Yet you heard my cry for mercy
when I called to you for help.

Love the Lord, all his faithful people!
The Lord preserves those who are true to him,
but the proud he pays back in full.
Be strong and take heart,
all you who hope in the Lord.” (Psalm 31:22-24)

Confession is good for the soul…so we have heard so many times. They “why and how” of this is very important to consider and meditate on. We confess- to ourselves, sometimes to a trusted and faithful other, and to God Himself- and we

are by the very remembering and saying the words claiming responsibility for displeasing God. If that were the end of the process, we might simply accumulate more and more guilt, and become encumbered and burdened beyond what we can bear. The second part of the process is vital- we confess, ask forgiveness, and repent- literally "turn away" from our sin- and then we receive the precious gift of forgiveness. The psalmist/David clearly understood this:

"Blessed is the one
whose transgressions are forgiven,
whose sins are covered.
Blessed is the one
whose sin the Lord does not count against them
and in whose spirit is no deceit.

When I kept silent,
my bones wasted away
through my groaning all day long.
For day and night
your hand was heavy on me;
my strength was sapped
as in the heat of summer.

Then I acknowledged my sin to you
and did not cover up my iniquity.
I said, "I will confess
my transgressions to the Lord."
And you forgave
the guilt of my sin." (Psalm 32:1-5)

This is one of the "tools" in the toolbox of every Christian, and is described again for us in 1 John 1:9 *"If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness."*

The psalmist then praises God and thanks Him for the great gift of forgiveness and the blessings that come from righteous living:

"Many are the woes of the wicked,
but the Lord's unfailing love
surrounds the one who trusts in him.

Rejoice in the Lord and be glad, you righteous;
sing, all you who are upright in heart!" (Psalm 32:10-11)

The psalmist then turns attention to the "conduct of the nations". Some people are fortunate to live in a place where the Word of God is honored and followed; many live where evil and the "heathen rage" (Psalm 2:1ff KJV). The psalmist points out the many blessings of nations that live "rightly":

"Sing joyfully to the LORD, you righteous;
it is fitting for the upright to praise him.
Praise the LORD with the harp;
make music to him on the ten-stringed lyre.

Sing to him a new song;
play skillfully, and shout for joy.

For the word of the LORD is right and true;
he is faithful in all he does.
The LORD loves righteousness and justice;
the earth is full of his unfailing love." (Psalm 32:1-5)

He then goes on to state:

"Blessed is the nation whose God is the Lord,
the people he chose for his inheritance.
From heaven the Lord looks down
and sees all mankind;
from his dwelling place he watches
all who live on earth—
he who forms the hearts of all,
who considers everything they do.
No king is saved by the size of his army;
no warrior escapes by his great strength.
A horse is a vain hope for deliverance;
despite all its great strength it cannot save.
But the eyes of the Lord are on those who fear him,
on those whose hope is in his unfailing love,
to deliver them from death
and keep them alive in famine." (Psalm 32:12-19)

Acts 21:15-40

Paul had been warned by the prophed Agabus not to go to Jerusalem, he had been told that he would be "bound" (Acts 21:11), yet Paul was true to his calling and went anyway. Just as the Spirit had spoken through Agabus, the Jews in Jerusalem stirred the crowd to a riot, making several accusations: 1) Paul taught "everone everywhere" against the Jewish Law (Acts 21:28); 2) Paul had brough a Greek (a Gentile) into the Temple with him (Acts 21:28). Verse 29 of Acts 21 parenthetically mentions that Paul had been seen with a Greek, and this was apparently the source of the accusation: "*They had previously seen Trophimus the Ephesian in the city with Paul and assumed that Paul had brought him into the temple." (*Acts 21:29)

The real issues were power and control. The Jews were losing (or perceived they were losing) power and influence over their own people as the Good News was preached and believed, and they were resentful, jealous and angry at Paul- or whoever else was preaching and teaching the people.

The result so this riot was that Paul was “bound”- jst as the Holy Spirit had indicated he would be- but the binding was actually a protection. The Jews intended- and tried- to kill Paul, but the Roman solidiers took control of the situation and literally saved Paul’s life: “*While they were trying to kill him, news reached the commander of the Roman troops that the whole city of Jerusalem was in an uproar. He at once took some officers and soldiers and ran down to the crowd. When the rioters saw the commander and his soldiers, they stopped beating Paul. The commander came up and arrested him and ordered him to be bound with two chains. Then he asked who he was and what he had done. Some in the crowd shouted one thing and some another, and since the commander could not get at the truth because of the uproar, he ordered that Paul be taken into the barracks. When Paul reached the steps, the violence of the mob was so great he had to be carried by the soldiers. The crowd that followed kept shouting, “Get rid of him!”* (Acts 21:31-36)

Later, when things had calmed down a bit, Paul identified himself to the commander of the troops: *“As the soldiers were about to take Paul into the barracks, he asked the commander, “May I say something to you?” “Do you speak Greek?” he replied. “Aren’t you the Egyptian who started a revolt and led four thousand terrorists out into the wilderness some time ago?” Paul answered, “I am a Jew, from Tarsus in Cilicia, a citizen of no ordinary city. Please let me speak to the people.” After receiving the commander’s permission, Paul stood on the steps and motioned to the crowd.“* (Acts 21:37-40)

Psalm 34-35 July 21, 2014 Acts 22

Psalm 34 is the source of so many treasures to me. It contains some of the deepest insights and most inspirational passages that have graced my life in my walk with the Lord. The psalmist- David- first starts with praise. I remember a wise pastor who once counselled- if you don’t “feel like” praising or praying (or both), then start by meditating on the nature and character of God. Start remembering His kindness, healing, constant presence and abiding love for you…once you are “thinking and meditating” correctly, then the feelings will follow! Great advice!

David starts with praising and thanking God for His protective presence in his life:

I will extol the Lord at all times;

his praise will always be on my lips.

I will glory in the Lord;

let the afflicted hear and rejoice.

Glorify the Lord with me;

let us exalt his name together.

I sought the Lord, and he answered me;

he delivered me from all my fears.

Those who look to him are radiant;

their faces are never covered with shame.

This poor man called, and the Lord heard him;

he saved him out of all his troubles.

The angel of the Lord encamps around those who fear him,

and he delivers them. (Psalm 34:1-7)

David points out the great and lasting benefits of praising and loving God- the "radiant" faces that "are never covered in shame", and the poor being "saved" out of troubles. The guardianship of God's angels has always been precious to me- "The angel of the Lord" has protected me numerous times from the fiery darts of th enemy, and from my own rebellious thoughts and actions.

David then gives an invitation to us:

"Taste and see that the LORD is good;
blessed is the one who takes refuge in him.
Fear the LORD, you his holy people,
for those who fear him lack nothing.
The lions may grow weak and hungry,
but those who seek the LORD lack no good thing." (Psalm 34:8-10)

We all know from experience that "bad things" happen to good people. We see loving and devoted servants of the Lord suffering daily, and yet we believe, and David urges us to believe, that the "righteous man" will be rewarded by God- God always has the final word on everything!:

"The righteous person may have many troubles,

but the Lord delivers him from them all;

he protects all his bones,

not one of them will be broken.

Evil will slay the wicked;

the foes of the righteous will be condemned.

The Lord will rescue his servants;

no one who takes refuge in him will be condemned." (Psalm 34:19-22)

And here we see another of the many prophesies of the Lord Jesus- His bones were not broken at the crucifixion, in fulfilment of the description in verse 20.

Some Christians have trouble with the "raw emotions" expressed in the Psalms. We must remember that the Psalms were written by real people in real danger, trouble and distress. David's anger at his enemies is simply that- an emotion. The Scriptures are not glorifying anger, but simply showing us that these emotions are a part of our lives. The Lord God can certainly hadle our anger- even the enger directed at Him. I firmly believe that our anger towards God is understood and "handled" in ways that we cannot even imagine- God would rathe have our anger than our indifference, our outrage than our uncaring silence!

David pleade with God to rid him of the persistent pursuit and mistreatment of his enemies. He claims God's protection and triumph, but- like us- wants it "right away"!:

"LORD, you have seen this; do not be silent.
Do not be far from me, Lord.
Awake, and rise to my defense!
Contend for me, my God and Lord.
Vindicate me in your righteousness, LORD my God;
do not let them gloat over me.
Do not let them think, "Aha, just what we wanted!"
or say, "We have swallowed him up."
May all who gloat over my distress
be put to shame and confusion;
may all who exalt themselves over me
be clothed with shame and disgrace.
May those who delight in my vindication
shout for joy and gladness;
may they always say, "The LORD be exalted,
who delights in the well-being of his servant."
My tongue will proclaim your righteousness,
your praises all day long." (Psalm 35:22-28)

Acts 22

Paul was given the opportunity to give his testimony, and it was a powerful one. He told the amazing story of his nearly complete "turnaround" from a fierce persecutor of the Way, to an energetic preacher and evangelist who had found his Messiah. The emotional climax of his testimony was his admission that he had stood in approval of the stoning of Stephen- the first recorded martyr for the Christian faith!: *"Lord,' I replied, 'these people know that I went from one synagogue to another to imprison and beat those who believe in you. And when the blood of your martyr[a] Stephen was shed, I stood there giving my approval and guarding the clothes of those who were killing him.' "Then the Lord said to me, 'Go; I will send you far away to the Gentiles.' "* (Acts 22:19-21)

God never just "saves us" to save us, He always has a purpose and a mission (and a mission statement) for each of us. He gracipusly gives us the privilege of participating with Him in the work of the Kingdom- the Great Harvest! Paul was no different. God chose an energetic, tough, intelligent, highly educated and thoroughly motivated (intense!) person to be His messenger- and He chooses us as well!

As had been the case with Stephen, the “crowd” listened until the final provocative words were uttered, then the crowd went out of control. How dare this person say he was “sent to us”? And God once again providentially saved Paul from peril and from flogging, this time because of Paul’s Roman citizenship. Accident? No- this was all part of God’s great plan for Paul! *“The crowd listened to Paul until he said this. Then they raised their voices and shouted, “Rid the earth of him! He’s not fit to live!” As they were shouting and throwing off their cloaks and flinging dust into the air, the commander ordered that Paul be taken into the barracks. He directed that he be flogged and interrogated in order to find out why the people were shouting at him like this. As they stretched him out to flog him, Paul said to the centurion standing there, “Is it legal for you to flog a Roman citizen who hasn’t even been found guilty?” When the centurion heard this, he went to the commander and reported it. “What are you going to do?” he asked. “This man is a Roman citizen.” The commander went to Paul and asked, “Tell me, are you a Roman citizen?” “Yes, I am,” he answered. Then the commander said, “I had to pay a lot of money for my citizenship.” “But I was born a citizen,” Paul replied. Those who were about to interrogate him withdrew immediately. The commander himself was alarmed when he realized that he had put Paul, a Roman citizen, in chains.”* (Acts 22:22-29)
At this point the final journey in Pauls’ earthly life had begun- his appeals and eventual transfer to Rome. He first was brought before the Sanhedrin (Acts 22:30), and then before a series of higher and higher ranking Roman officials until he reached his “last stop” under house arrest in Rome.

Psalm 36-37 **July 22, 2014** **Acts 23:1-11**

I have a message from God…so the Psalmist begins this song/plsalm. Some Christians firmly believe that they receive a "Word from God"- sometimes on a very regular basis. This Word can come when seeking an answer or a solution to a problem, at a moment of crisis, or simply during prayer. It is very clear that God speaks and communicates with us- that is His desire! The caution we should show at this point is to "test the spirits" (1 John 4) and see if the word we receive is truly a Word. We must remember that satan speaks lies to us, but we can be comfortable with a "word" we receive if it: 1) testifies to the Sonship and Lordship of Jesus (1 John 4:2) ; 2) is in keeping with the "whole counsel" of God as revealed in the Scripture (Acts 20:27); and 3) leads us to glorify and praise God.

The Psalmist received a word from God about the wicked:
"I have a message from God in my heart
concerning the sinfulness of the wicked:
There is no fear of God
before their eyes.
In their own eyes they flatter themselves
too much to detect or hate their sin.
The words of their mouths are wicked and deceitful;
they fail to act wisely or do good.

Even on their beds they plot evil;
they commit themselves to a sinful course
and do not reject what is wrong." (Psalm 36:1-4)

The psalmist then goes on to list up praise for the glorious works and ways of the Lord God:

"Your love, Lord, reaches to the heavens,
your faithfulness to the skies.
Your righteousness is like the highest mountains,
your justice like the great deep.
You, Lord, preserve both people and animals.
How priceless is your unfailing love, O God!
People take refuge in the shadow of your wings.
They feast on the abundance of your house;
you give them drink from your river of delights.
For with you is the fountain of life;
in your light we see light." (Psalm 36:5-9)

Two things are taught to us about God in this passage that are of key importnance- 1) God is love; and 2) God is light- "in Him there is no darkness" (1 John 1:5). These simple- yet profound- descriptions help us understand God's nature and ways. He does not delight in our lostness, wickedness or downfall- he loves us so completely that we can safely describe His love as "perfect" and *"There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment. The one who fears is not made perfect in love."* (1 John 4:18)

The desire of the psalmist is that God's love and protection continue:

"Continue your love to those who know you,
your righteousness to the upright in heart.
May the foot of the proud not come against me,
nor the hand of the wicked drive me away.
See how the evildoers lie fallen—
thrown down, not able to rise!" (Psalm 36:10-12)

Psalm 37 has always been dear to my heart. My first wife, who taught me so much about the Scriptures, had Psalm 37:4 engraved in my wedding band. It is a verse I literally carried with me for years, and carry in my heart now (though not in a wedding band!). "Delight yourself in the Lord"- sounds simple, doesn't it? Yet in these few words is a great depth of meaning- we must explore what it means to do this. IN my experience and understanding, "delighting" in the Lord literally means we take and derive great joy from both knowing and loving God and in doing His perfect will for our lives. The promise is "He will give you the desires of your heart". The secret- if we can call it a secret- is that when we love and enjoy God's presence and seek His will- we will desire what He desires- and we will be in haromony with His will- and we will literally be given the desires of His heart! A wonderful "win-win" situation!

The context of this wonderful verse is in the dierections given to us "not to worry" about those who do evil around us:

"Do not fret because of those who are evil
or be envious of those who do wrong;
for like the grass they will soon wither,
like green plants they will soon die away.

Trust in the Lord and do good;
dwell in the land and enjoy safe pasture." (Psalm 37:1-3)
Whatever pleasure or gain they derive from their evil is transient- only the favor of God's hand and His abiding love is permanent- God invites us to "dwell in the land and enjoy safe pasture"- and we, His sheep, would do well to take comfort in His advice.

The Psalmist then goes on to describe the wicked, and point out how God limits their "gains and pleasures":
"For those who are evil will be destroyed,
but those who hope in the Lord will inherit the land.
A little while, and the wicked will be no more;
though you look for them, they will not be found.
But the meek will inherit the land
and enjoy peace and prosperity.
The wicked plot against the righteous
and gnash their teeth at them;
but the Lord laughs at the wicked,
for he knows their day is coming.
The wicked draw the sword
and bend the bow
to bring down the poor and needy,
to slay those whose ways are upright.
But their swords will pierce their own hearts,
and their bows will be broken.
Better the little that the righteous have
than the wealth of many wicked;
for the power of the wicked will be broken,
but the Lord upholds the righteous.
The blameless spend their days under the Lord's care,
and their inheritance will endure forever.
In times of disaster they will not wither;
in days of famine they will enjoy plenty.
But the wicked will perish:
Though the Lord's enemies are like the flowers of the field,
they will be consumed, they will go up in smoke." (Psalm 37:9-20)
Then we find another gem- a wonderful promise from God about His care for us:
"I was young and now I am old,
yet I have never seen the righteous forsaken
or their children begging bread.
They are always generous and lend freely;
their children will be a blessing." (Psalm 37:25-26)

We are reminded by Jesus to pray for "our daily bread" (Matthew 6:11), and we may remember that the manna from heaven was only a one-day supply -except for the Sabbath. (Exodus 16:16-22). God knows our needs- including our "bread" and will supply it to us out of His generosity and caring for us. Also note that their (the righteous) children are "a blessing"! Many is the time I wondered if my four were, but God has shown me over and over that this is the "real truth"- they are a blessing- at least to me. My prayer is that they will be a blessing to others as well.

Finally, the Psalmist reminds us that we can take refuge in the Lord, and the He alone is our salvation:

“The salvation of the righteous comes from the Lord;
he is their stronghold in time of trouble.
The Lord helps them and delivers them;
he delivers them from the wicked and saves them,
because they take refuge in him.” (Psalm 37:39-40)

Acts 23:1-11

Paul was then taken to testify before the Sanhedrin. He started his testimony simply and straightforwardly, but the members of this body were apparently not ready to hear anything good from Paul: *“My brothers, I have fulfilled my duty to God in all good conscience to this day.” At this the high priest Ananias ordered those standing near Paul to strike him on the mouth. Then Paul said to him, “God will strike you, you whitewashed wall! You sit there to judge me according to the law, yet you yourself violate the law by commanding that I be struck!” Those who were standing near Paul said, “How dare you insult God’s high priest!” Paul replied, “Brothers, I did not realize that he was the high priest; for it is written: ‘Do not speak evil about the ruler of your people.’”* (Acts 21:1b-5 quoting Exodus 22:28)

In juts a moment the order was turned into disorder, and Paul was genuinely apologetic about being disrespectful of the high priest, even though the priest’s behavior was not very “priestly”!

The Paul seized an opportunity to turn the focus away from himself. Realizing that both Pharisees (who believe in a afterlife) and Sadducees (who do not) were present, Paul identifies himself as a Pharisee, and this time the contention is between these two rival factions:
“Then Paul, knowing that some of them were Sadducees and the others Pharisees, called out in the Sanhedrin, “My brothers, I am a Pharisee, descended from Pharisees. I stand on trial because of the hope of the resurrection of the dead.” When he said this, a dispute broke out between the Pharisees and the Sadducees, and the assembly was divided. (The Sadducees say that there is no resurrection, and that there are neither angels nor spirits, but the Pharisees believe all these things.) There was a great uproar, and some of the teachers of the law who were Pharisees stood up and argued vigorously. “We find nothing wrong with this man,” they said. “What if a spirit or an angel has spoken to him?” The dispute became so violent that the commander was afraid Paul would be torn to pieces by them. He ordered the troops to go down and take him away from them by force and bring him into the barracks.” (Acts 21:6-10) The uproar was go great that the Roman soldiers had to restore order.

Paul is then given the assurenace that he will travel to, and testify in the city of Rone: *“The following night the Lord stood near Paul and said, “Take courage! As you have testified about me in Jerusalem, so you must also testify in Rome.”* (Acts 21:11)

Paul testifies before the Sanhedrin in Jerusalem

Psalm 38-40 July 23, 2014 Acts 23:12-35

Sin has consequences- some are fleeting- some stay with us seemingly forever. The Psalmist- David- describes the results of his own sinfulness in Psalm 38:

"Lord, do not rebuke me in your anger
or discipline me in your wrath.
2 Your arrows have pierced me,
and your hand has come down on me.
3 Because of your wrath there is no health in my body;
there is no soundness in my bones because of my sin.
4 My guilt has overwhelmed me
like a burden too heavy to bear.
5 My wounds fester and are loathsome
because of my sinful folly.
6 I am bowed down and brought very low;
all day long I go about mourning.
7 My back is filled with searing pain;
there is no health in my body.
8 I am feeble and utterly crushed;
I groan in anguish of heart." (Psalm 38:1-8)

The psalmist proclaims that her has lost health ans soundness, and has been burdened with guilt- and that he litereally groans "in anguish of heart". What is the remedy- how can this sequence of sin and consequences be broken- this cycle of sin and despair- by confession and by acknowledgement that we have sinned. The sick person must confront their sickness- by diagnosis and then accept treatment- to be well again. So must we "own" our sin and confess and ask forgiveness:

"For I am about to fall,
and my pain is ever with me.

I confess my iniquity;

I am troubled by my sin.

Many have become my enemies without cause[b];

those who hate me without reason are numerous.

Those who repay my good with evil

lodge accusations against me,

though I seek only to do what is good.

Lord, do not forsake me;

do not be far from me, my God.

Come quickly to help me,

my Lord and my Savior." (Psalm 38:17-22)

The cycle is finally broken when the Psalmist confeeses intquity and is "troubled" by his sin! The God can act savingly and redeem.

Psalm 39 deals with "silence before the Lord". Ceartainly there are many times we should be silent and listen intently for God's Word for us. This instance, however, is one in which the Psalmist needs to speak- clearly and forthrightly- to his God as a witness to the "wicked":

"I said, "I will watch my ways

and keep my tongue from sin;

I will put a muzzle on my mouth

while in the presence of the wicked."

So I remained utterly silent,

not even saying anything good.

But my anguish increased;

my heart grew hot within me.

While I meditated, the fire burned;

then I spoke with my tongue:

"Show me, Lord, my life's end

and the number of my days;

let me know how fleeting my life is." (Psalm 39:1-4)

The Psalmist should have said something "good" and was instead silent and self-0righteous. Having been convicted of his sin, the Psalmist pleads with God to hear his prayer:

"But now, Lord, what do I look for?

My hope is in you.

Save me from all my transgressions;

do not make me the scorn of fools.

I was silent; I would not open my mouth,

for you are the one who has done this.

Remove your scourge from me;

I am overcome by the blow of your hand.

When you rebuke and discipline anyone for their sin,

you consume their wealth like a moth—

surely everyone is but a breath.

"Hear my prayer, Lord,

listen to my cry for help;

do not be deaf to my weeping.

I dwell with you as a foreigner,

a stranger, as all my ancestors were.

Look away from me, that I may enjoy life again

before I depart and am no more." (Psalm 39:7-13)

So real is the sin that the Psalmist feesl that he asks God to "look away"- his shame is overpowering and heartfelt- he does not feel worthy to be in the presence of his God. Yet the very presence of God is not only a constant reality, but a necessity for him and for us, for we must make our peace, realizing that "everyone is but a breath"- the time for reconciliation is now!

Once again David is in "the pits". This is not meant literally, although some did (and do!) fall into literal "pits". David is in a bad place- emotionally, spiritually and perhaps physically- but he has discovered the power in 'waiting for the Lord". God lofts David out of his "bad place" and does so as a witness not only to David but also to those who witness this deliverance:

"I waited patiently for the Lord;

he turned to me and heard my cry.

He lifted me out of the slimy pit,

out of the mud and mire;

he set my feet on a rock

and gave me a firm place to stand.

He put a new song in my mouth,

a hymn of praise to our God.

Many will see and fear the Lord

and put their trust in him." (Psalm 40:1-3)

David rells us here (as well as in Psalm 51) that the Lord does not require- and is not impressed with "sacrifices and offerings". God's very Son would struggle to

communicate this truth to His listeners thousands of years later. What God desires is a “heart” which has God’s very Law written upon it:

“Sacrifice and offering you did not desire—

but my ears you have opened—

burnt offerings and sin offerings[h] you did not require.

Then I said, “Here I am, I have come—

it is written about me in the scroll.

I desire to do your will, my God;

your law is within my heart.” (Psalm 40:6-8)

David testified to God’s saving work in his life, and did so unashamedly and in the presence of others:

“I proclaim your saving acts in the great assembly;

I do not seal my lips, Lord,

as you know.

10 I do not hide your righteousness in my heart;

I speak of your faithfulness and your saving help.

I do not conceal your love and your faithfulness

from the great assembly.” (Psalm 40:9-10)

Then David asks God to “set things right”- that his adversaries would be thwarted and his righteousness rewarded:

“Do not withhold your mercy from me, Lord;

may your love and faithfulness always protect me.

For troubles without number surround me;

my sins have overtaken me, and I cannot see.

They are more than the hairs of my head,

and my heart fails within me.

Be pleased to save me, Lord;

come quickly, Lord, to help me.

May all who want to take my life

be put to shame and confusion;

may all who desire my ruin

be turned back in disgrace.

May those who say to me, “Aha! Aha!”

be appalled at their own shame.

But may all who seek you

rejoice and be glad in you;

may those who long for your saving help always say,

"The Lord is great!"

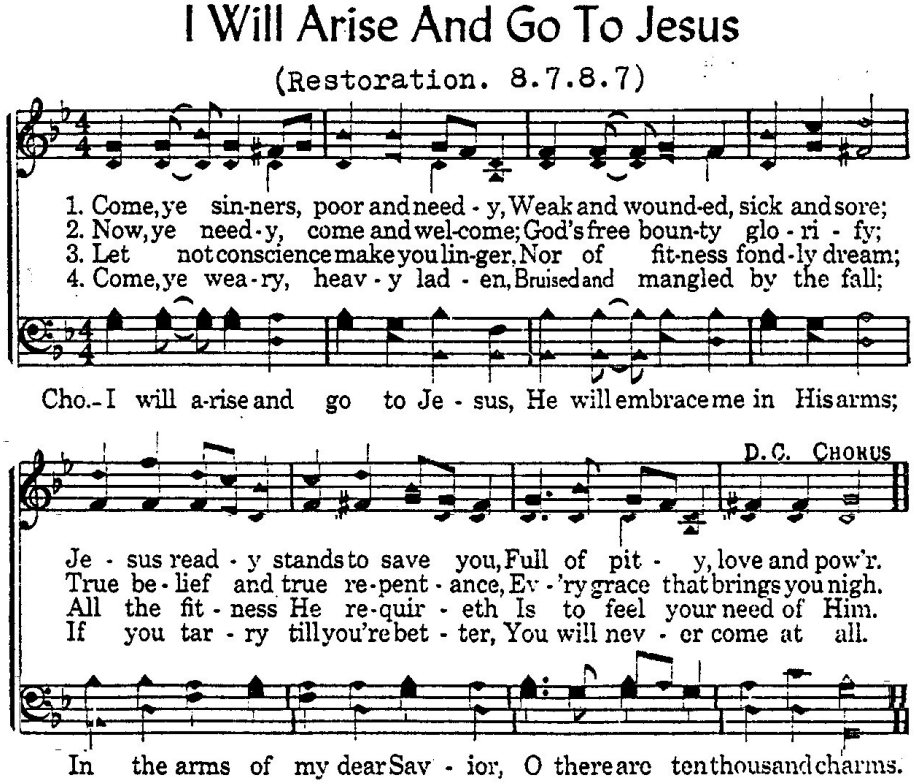
But as for me, I am poor and needy;

may the Lord think of me.

You are my help and my deliverer;

you are my God, do not delay." (Psalm 40:11-17).

Verse 17- "But as for me, I am poor and needy" reminds me of the great Southern Harmony tune Restoration, based partly on this Scripture and Matthew 11:28-30:



Acts 23:12-35

One again, Paul's life is in danger. So intent are Paul's enemies, that they take an oath not to "eat anything" until they have killed Paul. Their numbers were overwhelming, but God prevented this untimely end for his messenger by sending a young boy –Paul's nephew-to warn the Roman commander of this plot: "*The next morning some Jews formed a conspiracy and bound themselves with an oath not to eat or drink until they had killed Paul. More than forty men were involved in this plot. They went to the chief priests and the elders and said, "We have taken a solemn oath not to eat anything until we have killed Paul. Now then, you and the Sanhedrin petition the commander to bring him before you on the pretext of wanting more accurate information about his case. We are ready to kill him before he gets here." But when the son of Paul's sister heard of this plot, he went into the*

barracks and told Paul. Then Paul called one of the centurions and said, "Take this young man to the commander; he has something to tell him." So he took him to the commander. The centurion said, "Paul, the prisoner, sent for me and asked me to bring this young man to you because he has something to tell you." The commander took the young man by the hand, drew him aside and asked, "What is it you want to tell me?" He said: "Some Jews have agreed to ask you to bring Paul before the Sanhedrin tomorrow on the pretext of wanting more accurate information about him. Don't give in to them, because more than forty of them are waiting in ambush for him. They have taken an oath not to eat or drink until they have killed him. They are ready now, waiting for your consent to their request." The commander dismissed the young man with this warning: "Don't tell anyone that you have reported this to me." (Acts 23:12-22)

Coincidence?- hardly- God instance- definitely! The Romans arranged for a protective security force so that Paul could be safey transported to Governor Felix (Antonius Felix- the Procurator of Judea- see http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Antonius_Felix) When Paul arrived in Felix's dwelling, he was ordered kept confined until Paul's accusers could arrive. This was still another instance in which God used "pagan" and unbelieving rulers to spread and strengthen the Kingdom and church. Paul would be afforded several opportunites to testify to his faith before Felix, and to all the others gathered to hear the proceedings. As we will see in the next chapter, Felix's wife Drusilla was a Jew- certainly not an accident! She was to be presented the Truth, as were many others.

Psalm 41-43 July 24, 2014 Acts 24

How do we treat the weak and helpless, or those that we "don't have to be nice to" like hotel or reataurant staff? This reveals a lot about our character. The Psalmist reminds himself that these are people who are truly blessed (joyful and full of happiness):

"Blessed are those who have regard for the weak;
the LORD delivers them in times of trouble.
The LORD protects and preserves them—
they are counted among the blessed in the land—
he does not give them over to the desire of their foes.
The LORD sustains them on their sickbed
and restores them from their bed of illness.
I said, "Have mercy on me, LORD;
heal me, for I have sinned against you."
My enemies say of me in malice,
"When will he die and his name perish?"
When one of them comes to see me,
he speaks falsely, while his heart gathers slander;
then he goes out and spreads it around." (Psalm 41:1-6)

In the midst of the Psalmist's cry for mercy, healing and victory over his enemies we find this little verse of prophesy, Thousands of years later the Lord Jesus would realize that one of His most trusted friends and followers would betray Him:

"Even my close friend,
someone I trusted,
one who shared my bread,
has turned against me." (Psalm 41:9).

And Judas, who shared bread with Jesus (Matthew 26:23, John 13:26), did just that!

God blesses these kind and caring folks with His tender care- even when they are unable to defend themselves and are surrounded by enemies who wish the "worst" for them.

The Psalmist then asks God to "raise him up" out of his sickness so he can have victory over his enemies. We must remember again that the Psalms are ruthlessly honest about human feelings, and the dynamics of the human heart. God is not putting His "stamp of approval" on the raw emotions and primal desires of the Psalmist to get even, but God is reminding us that He is powerful, wise, and will deal out His own justice- justice that is prefect and fair. God is neither surprised nor disturbd or upset by our emotions- but He alone holds the power to change things in a radical and fundamental way:

"But may you have mercy on me, Lord;
raise me up, that I may repay them.
I know that you are pleased with me,
for my enemy does not triumph over me.
Because of my integrity you uphold me
and set me in your presence forever.
Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel,
from everlasting to everlasting.
Amen and Amen." (Psalm 41:10-13)

Where is your God? This taunt and insult has been heard by many faithful believers. The Psalmist (identity not disclosed) reviews and remembers his desire to be in the precious presence of God, to worship the God of the universe in the Temple, and to enjoy the close fellowship of worship:

"As the deer pants for streams of water,

so my soul pants for you, my God.

My soul thirsts for God, for the living God.

When can I go and meet with God?

My tears have been my food

day and night,

while people say to me all day long,

"Where is your God?"

These things I remember

as I pour out my soul:

how I used to go to the house of God

under the protection of the Mighty One

with shouts of joy and praise

among the festive throng.

Why, my soul, are you downcast?

Why so disturbed within me?

Put your hope in God,

for I will yet praise him,

my Savior and my God." (Psalm 42:1-5)

The psalmist remembers the times that he went to "the house of God" and was "under the protection of the Mighty One". His conclusion is both insightful and wonderful- "I will yet praise Him, my Savior and my God".

This psalm is one of many that has been put in a modern choral setting, notably by Martin Nystrom in 1981 (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/As_the_Deer). This psalm has become a "modern" song of praise and worship- how appropriate!

After reciting his woes and worries, and complaining that it "feels like" God has abandoned him, the psalmist concludes with this wonderful resolution:

"Why, my soul, are you downcast?

Why so disturbed within me?

Put your hope in God,

for I will yet praise him,

my Savior and my God." (Psalm 41:11)

Psalm 43 is an interesting parallel to Psalm 42. The psalmist is pleading for "vindication" against an "unfaithful nation" – a whole host of enemies- instead of a single (or at most several) "foe", and wants to be taken to the Temple where he can worship and connect with the strength that the psalmist knows is there:

"Vindicate me, my God,

and plead my cause

against an unfaithful nation.

Rescue me from those who are

deceitful and wicked.

You are God my stronghold.

Why have you rejected me?

Why must I go about mourning,

oppressed by the enemy?

Send me your light and your faithful care,

let them lead me;

let them bring me to your holy mountain,

to the place where you dwell." (Psalm 42:1-3)

The ending of this psalm is identical to that of Psalm 42 (Psalm 43:5), which suggests to me that they may have been sung together in worship, with the last verse as a "chorus" (see https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=1083).

Acts 24

So the accusers have now arrived, and the hearing before Felix can begin. The true theological "heavyweights" Annanias, the high priest, and the attourney Tertullus were set against Paul. Why did this "itinerant preacher" command such a stellar lineup of legal and theological talent and experience? Simply this- Paul was (correctly) perceived as a threat to the "status quo"- the continued power and influence of the Jewish leaders over their people. And so they did their best to denigrate, accuse and put Paul (and his actions) in the most unfavorable light possible.

The factor that these two powerful men forgot was the power and righteousness of God. God had chosen Paul, had literally knocked him down to the ground (Acts 9:4) on the road to Damascus, and was not through with His servant and the mission Paul represented just yet!: *"Five days later the high priest Ananias went down to Caesarea with some of the elders and a lawyer named Tertullus, and they brought their charges against Paul before the governor. When Paul was called in, Tertullus presented his case before Felix: "We have enjoyed a long period of peace under you, and your foresight has brought about reforms in this nation. Everywhere and in every way, most excellent Felix, we acknowledge this with profound gratitude. But in order not to weary you further, I would request that you be kind enough to hear us briefly. "We have found this man to be a troublemaker, stirring up riots among*

the Jews all over the world. He is a ringleader of the Nazarene sect and even tried to desecrate the temple; so we seized him. By examining him yourself you will be able to learn the truth about all these charges we are bringing against him." The other Jews joined in the accusation, asserting that these things were true." (Acts 24:1-9)

Then Paul spoke on his own behalf in a clear, measured and thoughtful way- the way a person with the confidence of God's blessings and presence would. God would use this opportunity to have Paul present the Good News- to one of the most powerful and influential persons in the world: *"When the governor motioned for him to speak, Paul replied: "I know that for a number of years you have been a judge over this nation; so I gladly make my defense. You can easily verify that no more than twelve days ago I went up to Jerusalem to worship. My accusers did not find me arguing with anyone at the temple, or stirring up a crowd in the synagogues or anywhere else in the city. And they cannot prove to you the charges they are now making against me. However, I admit that I worship the God of our ancestors as a follower of the Way, which they call a sect. I believe everything that is in accordance with the Law and that is written in the Prophets, and I have the same hope in God as these men themselves have, that there will be a resurrection of both the righteous and the wicked. So I strive always to keep my conscience clear before God and man."* (Acts 24:10-16).

The reaction and response of Felix shows that he was convicted by God of the truth he was hearing from Paul*:"Several days later Felix came with his wife Drusilla, who was Jewish. He sent for Paul and listened to him as he spoke about faith in Christ Jesus. As Paul talked about righteousness, self-control and the judgment to come, Felix was afraid and said, "That's enough for now! You may leave. When I find it convenient, I will send for you." At the same time he was hoping that Paul would offer him a bribe, so he sent for him frequently and talked with him. When two years had passed, Felix was succeeded by Porcius Festus, but because Felix wanted to grant a favor to the Jews, he left Paul in prison."* (Acts 24:24-27). Leaving Paul in prison was a "political favor" to the Jews, but this extra time allowed Paul even more opportunities to present the Gospel, this next time to Festus. What man intended for evil, God turned into good (Genesis 50:20)!

William Hogarth: Paul before Felix 1752

Psalm 44-46 July 25, 2014 Acts 25

Repetition…makes an impression more than a single hearing or reciting… remembering…is so important in establishing who we are as God's people. Many of the Scriptures point God's people to their spiritual heritage- their past with their Creator, and so reinforce the memory and the motivating force that these memories and experiences can generate in the soul and spirit. So it is that the beginning of Psalm 44 is a repetition of sorts of who God is and what he has done for the people:

"We have heard it with our ears, O God;
our ancestors have told us
what you did in their days,
in days long ago.
With your hand you drove out the nations
and planted our ancestors;
you crushed the peoples
and made our ancestors flourish.
It was not by their sword that they won the land,
nor did their arm bring them victory;
it was your right hand, your arm,
and the light of your face, for you loved them." (Psalm 44:1-3)

The Psalmist correctly ascribes the source of victory not as the "sword" but the "right hand" of God. Even though these "god stories" are told and re-told, and even though the Psalmist knows the truth and power of these remembrances- there is great sadness. God's own people have left His care and gone their own way, and now they are reaping the bitter consequences of their wrongheaded and stubborn choices:

"But now you have rejected and humbled us;
you no longer go out with our armies.
You made us retreat before the enemy,
and our adversaries have plundered us.
You gave us up to be devoured like sheep
and have scattered us among the nations.
You sold your people for a pittance,
gaining nothing from their sale." (Psalm 44:9-12)

The Psalmist, like Job, is struggling for answers. Surely God knows we have not forgotten Him! Surely God sees our hearts! And yet the reality is that the people feel abandoned and cry out to God for help and guidance:

"If we had forgotten the name of our God
or spread out our hands to a foreign god,
would not God have discovered it,
since he knows the secrets of the heart?
Yet for your sake we face death all day long;
we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered.
Awake, Lord! Why do you sleep?
Rouse yourself! Do not reject us forever.
Why do you hide your face
and forget our misery and oppression?
We are brought down to the dust;
our bodies cling to the ground.
Rise up and help us;
rescue us because of your unfailing love." (Psalm 44:20-26)

The Psalmist shows confusion and distress- mainly because he cannot find a "simple answer" to a complex problem. The Hebrew people believed that God dealt with them primarily as a group, as a nation, not as individuals. The "collective obedience" of the people was the barometer by which many predicted the response that God would give. God, however, is beyond our reason, plans or simple "schemes". He will not be "manipulated by His own people- His ways are sometimes mysterious and inpenetrable. We cannot expect God to "behave"- to follow our expectations, simply because we have been "obedient" – or at least obedient by our own standards.

What follows is a 'wedding song", apparently written for the marriage of a "king" and his bride. Forst the Psalmist praises the King:

"My heart is stirred by a noble theme
as I recite my verses for the king;
my tongue is the pen of a skillful writer.
You are the most excellent of men
and your lips have been anointed with grace,
since God has blessed you forever.
Gird your sword on your side, you mighty one;
clothe yourself with splendor and majesty.
In your majesty ride forth victoriously

in the cause of truth, humility and justice;

let your right hand achieve awesome deeds." (Psalm 45:1-4).

Some commentators have suggested that this psalm is prophetic of Christ the King, and point out the sterling and unimpeachable character of the King as evidence for this. The psalmist makes a transition from describing the King to a description of God and His throne:

"Your throne, O God, will last for ever and ever;

a scepter of justice will be the scepter of your kingdom.

You love righteousness and hate wickedness;

therefore God, your God, has set you above your companions

by anointing you with the oil of joy.

All your robes are fragrant with myrrh and aloes and cassia;

from palaces adorned with ivory

the music of the strings makes you glad.

Daughters of kings are among your honored women;

at your right hand is the royal bride in gold of Ophir.

Listen, daughter, and pay careful attention:

Forget your people and your father's house.

Let the king be enthralled by your beauty;

honor him, for he is your lord." (Psalm 45:6-11) One can certainly see that the bride (the church) is praised and honored and enriched by the presence of and union with such a king!

The imagery concludes with a picture of the succession of the King. These may well be prophetic words of the succession of God's people, who will hold His memories dear to their hearts always:

"Your sons will take the place of your fathers;

you will make them princes throughout the land.

I will perpetuate your memory through all generations;

therefore the nations will praise you for ever and ever." (Psalm 45:16-17)

Praise…an integral part of worship- and we are taught by Scripture that God "inhabits the praise of His people" (Psalm 22:3) We see such praise here in this song/psalm of praise, first in exalting God:

"God is our refuge and strength,

an ever-present help in trouble.

Therefore we will not fear, though the earth give way

and the mountains fall into the heart of the sea,

though its waters roar and foam

and the mountains quake with their surging." (Psalm 46:1-3)

And the chorus, which we see twice is:

"The LORD Almighty is with us;
the God of Jacob is our fortress." (Psalm 45:7,11)

The psalmist is generous in his description of the maighty nature and cats of his God:

"Come and see what the Lord has done,

the desolations he has brought on the earth.

He makes wars cease

to the ends of the earth.

He breaks the bow and shatters the spear;

he burns the shields with fire.

He says, "Be still, and know that I am God;

I will be exalted among the nations,

I will be exalted in the earth." (Psalm 46:8-10)

This God is powerful, this God is mighty in battle, this God deserves and receives exaltation throughout the eart- this God is truly God!

Acts 25

The drama continues to unfold with Paul- first he is in Felix's court, the Festus' court and then appeals to Caesar- with a stop along the way with King Agrippa. The reason for this seemingly endless defense is severalfold: 1) to increase Paul's already strong faith and dependence on God for "everything"; 2) to serve as a series of opportunities to witness to the Gospel to heads of state; and 3) to finally place Paul in Rome, where he had an effective 'writing ministry" to the churches while under house arrest. God never seems to waste a crisis and turs it into an opportunity!

Paul defends himself by stating that the charges against him have no merit and cannot be proven (because they are false!): *"After spending eight or ten days with them, Festus went down to Caesarea. The next day he convened the court and ordered that Paul be brought before him. When Paul came in, the Jews who had come down from Jerusalem stood around him. They brought many serious charges against him, but they could not prove them. Then Paul made his defense: "I have*

done nothing wrong against the Jewish law or against the temple or against Caesar." Festus, wishing to do the Jews a favor, said to Paul, "Are you willing to go up to Jerusalem and stand trial before me there on these charges?" Paul answered: "I am now standing before Caesar's court, where I ought to be tried. I have not done any wrong to the Jews, as you yourself know very well. If, however, I am guilty of doing anything deserving death, I do not refuse to die. But if the charges brought against me by these Jews are not true, no one has the right to hand me over to them. I appeal to Caesar!" After Festus had conferred with his council, he declared: "You have appealed to Caesar. To Caesar you will go!" (Acts 25:6-12)

When Festus consults with Agrippa about this "problem prisoner", he sheds some light on the way in which Christianity was perceived by the "outside world" at that time: *"When his accusers got up to speak, they did not charge him with any of the crimes I had expected. Instead, they had some points of dispute with him about their own religion and about a dead man named Jesus who Paul claimed was alive. I was at a loss how to investigate such matters; so I asked if he would be willing to go to Jerusalem and stand trial there on these charges. But when Paul made his appeal to be held over for the Emperor's decision, I ordered him held until I could send him to Caesar." Then Agrippa said to Festus, "I would like to hear this man myself." He replied, "Tomorrow you will hear him."* (Acts 25:18-22)

Festus seems anxious to have some "specific charges" against Paul to accompany him on his trip to Rome, but seems to be unable to find anything specific. This is so typical of the small mind of man, which insists on "labeling" and characterizing minute details, often to avoid looking at the obvious big picture. It was evident to anyone who had common sense that Paul was neither guilty nor a threat to the empire, yet the leaders of Rome insisted on having things go their way- which included all their proper forms, protocols and procedures. As always, this is an exercise in futility. God's plan for Paul was larger, more significant and far more powerful than any scheme of man or government! *"At the command of Festus, Paul was brought in. Festus said: "King Agrippa, and all who are present with us, you see this man! The whole Jewish community has petitioned me about him in Jerusalem and here in Caesarea, shouting that he ought not to live any longer. I found he had done nothing deserving of death, but because he made his appeal to the Emperor I decided to send him to Rome. But I have nothing definite to write to His Majesty about him. Therefore I have brought him before all of you, and especially before you, King Agrippa, so that as a result of this investigation I may have something to write. For I think it is unreasonable to send a prisoner on to Rome without specifying the charges against him."* (Acts 25:23b-27)

Paul Before Agrippa and Bernice -Martin, David, 1639-1721

Psalm 47-49 July 26, 2014 Acts 26

God is in His heaven and everything's right! How we sometimes long for that feeling of "rightness" and order, that feeling that God is obviously, completely, totally in control and reigning in righteousness! The Psalmist shares this excitement, and praises God:

"Clap your hands, all you nations;
shout to God with cries of joy.
For the Lord Most High is awesome,
the great King over all the earth.
He subdued nations under us,
peoples under our feet.
He chose our inheritance for us,
the pride of Jacob, whom he loved." (Psalm 47:1-4)

He then goes on to say that God has "ascended". Some commentators point out that the alternate phrase "gone up" (Psalm 47:5 KJV) suggests that God has ascended, and that we aill (and do!) shout with joy that he has visited His people and now ascends to His throne:

"God has ascended amid shouts of joy,
the Lord amid the sounding of trumpets.
Sing praises to God, sing praises;

sing praises to our King, sing praises.
For God is the King of all the earth;
sing to him a psalm of praise." (Psalm 47:5-7)

The psalmist then reminds us that God is supremen over all the kings of the earth, and that they belong to Him:

"God reigns over the nations;
God is seated on his holy throne.
The nobles of the nations assemble
as the people of the God of Abraham,
for the kings of the earth belong to God;
he is greatly exalted." (Psalm 47:8-9)

"Great is the Lord" goes the popular praise song…and the Psalmist agrees!

Great is the Lord,
He is holy and just
By His power we trust
In His love
Great is the Lord
He is faithful and true
By His mercy He proves
He is love (Michael W. Smith)

God is great, and inhabits the holy mountain of Zion:

"Great is the Lord, and most worthy of praise,
in the city of our God, his holy mountain.
Beautiful in its loftiness,
the joy of the whole earth,
like the heights of Zaphon[e] is Mount Zion,
the city of the Great King.
God is in her citadels;
he has shown himself to be her fortress." (Psalm 48:1-3)

This is our God- and our leader- now and forever!:

"Walk about Zion, go around her,
count her towers,
consider well her ramparts,
view her citadels,
that you may tell of them
to the next generation.
For this God is our God for ever and ever;
he will be our guide even to the end." (Psalm 48:12-14)

“Greed is good” was the motto (and famous quote) from the character Gordon Gekko from the motion picture “Wall Street”- “The point is ladies and gentlemen that greed, for lack of a better word, is good.” So many believe this, and trust in their wealth (and attendant power) rather than trusting the Lord- they insulate themselves from need- and miss the opportunity for the rich and intimate fellowship with their very Creator!

The Psalmist observes and wisely counsels us that no amount of wealth is a substitute for a righteous, Godly life, and that no sum of money can prevent death:

“For all can see that the wise die,

that the foolish and the senseless also perish,

leaving their wealth to others.

Their tombs will remain their houses forever,

their dwellings for endless generations,

though they had named lands after themselves.

People, despite their wealth, do not endure;

they are like the beasts that perish.” (Psalm 49:10-12)

We are counseled by this Scripture not to be “impressed” with great wealth, station or power, for none of these will provide godliness, character, or even a well lived life. Those who have “wealth but no understanding” are to be pitied as not having lived life to its full potential:

“Do not be overawed when others grow rich,

when the splendor of their houses increases;

for they will take nothing with them when they die,

their splendor will not descend with them.

Though while they live they count themselves blessed—

and people praise you when you prosper—

they will join those who have gone before them,

who will never again see the light of life.

People who have wealth but lack understanding

are like the beasts that perish.” (Psalm 49:16-20)

Acts 26

Another day, another hearing, and another wonderful opportunity for Paul to present the gospel. He had several great advantages in his presentation: 1) he knew his listeners well- he knew what “language” they would listen and pay attention to; 2) he had the great confidence of one who had trusted God for his life- over and over- and found that God would provide and protect; and lastly 3) he had

no real fear of death or “adversity”. (“For me, to live is Christ and to die is gain” Philippians 1:21- NIV)

Paul presents his testimony- his amazing transformation from zealous persecutor of the church to fearless preacher and evangelizer. The testimony is not lost on his listeners. At one point, Agrippa asks: *“Do you think that in such a short time you can persuade me to be a Christian?”*

Paul replied, “Short time or long—I pray to God that not only you but all who are listening to me today may become what I am, except for these chains.” (Acts 26:28b-29) Paul DID believe that Agrippa could (and should!) be converted, whether by Paul himself or someone else, either in a “short time” or a long one. His statement in verse 29 is truly exceptional- Paul wanted everyone to believe savingly in Jesus- and expected God to work in their lives to accomplish this.

Festus even interrupts and tries to distract Paul from his testimony, suggesting that Paul is “crazy”: *“At this point Festus interrupted Paul’s defense. “You are out of your mind, Paul!” he shouted. “Your great learning is driving you insane.” “I am not insane, most excellent Festus,” Paul replied. “What I am saying is true and reasonable. The king is familiar with these things, and I can speak freely to him. I am convinced that none of this has escaped his notice, because it was not done in a corner.”* (Acts 26:24-26)

Having once more heard Paul’s powerful defense, the same conclusion is inevitably reached by these men- as it would by any persons not hopelessly prejudiced against Paul- he had done no wrong. Paul could, in fact, have been set free except for his “appeal to Caesar” as stated here: *“The king rose, and with him the governor and Bernice and those sitting with them. After they left the room, they began saying to one another, “This man is not doing anything that deserves death or imprisonment.” Agrippa said to Festus, “This man could have been set free if he had not appealed to Caesar.”* (Acts 26:30-32).

So, we might ask, why was Paul not set free? What possible purpose could be accomplished by keeping him in chains, or under house arrest? The conclusion that I have made is that God had a plan for Paul which included his presence in the very center of the most influential city in the ancient world- Rome. From the “hub” Paul’s letters, preaching and witnessing could have additional power and influence simply by their location in the “center of everything”.

Psalm 50-52 July 27, 2014 Acts 27:1-25

Why do we sacrifice? Why do we follow the rituals of sin, guilt, wave and other offerings? These and related questions surely arose during the time of the first covenant between God and His people Israel. The intention of the sacrifice was to show God, by actions rather than just words, that he was worthy of the very best, and that something that cost us to offer was a worthy gift of dedication and thanks to God. Unfortunately, the heart is deceitful (Jer 17:9), and routines become empty unless we are truly engaged in this and other acts of worship. The Psalmist points out that God is not honored by a careless, half hearted and purely ritualistic

offering- He owns everything anyway- and is interested in our hearts and our relationship with Him:

"Listen, my people, and I will speak;

I will testify against you, Israel:

I am God, your God.

I bring no charges against you concerning your sacrifices

or concerning your burnt offerings, which are ever before me.

I have no need of a bull from your stall

or of goats from your pens,

for every animal of the forest is mine,

and the cattle on a thousand hills.

I know every bird in the mountains,

and the insects in the fields are mine.

If I were hungry I would not tell you,

for the world is mine, and all that is in it.

Do I eat the flesh of bulls

or drink the blood of goats?

"Sacrifice thank offerings to God,

fulfill your vows to the Most High,

and call on me in the day of trouble;

I will deliver you, and you will honor me." (Psalm 50:7-15)

God's love, though, is shown as "tough love" to those that dishonor Him. God will allow these who practice evil to reap the consequences of their actions, and to deal with the emptiness and shallowness of their lives alone- they have, after all, rejected God's company, direction and leadership an insisted on doing things their won way:

"Consider this, you who forget God,

or I will tear you to pieces, with no one to rescue you:

Those who sacrifice thank offerings honor me,

and to the blameless I will show my salvation." (Psalm 50:22-23)

Psalm 51 is one that I return to over and over. David perfectly captures the heart and mind of the sinner who knows his own sin, and is deeply distressed by it and is literally begging God for mercy and forgiveness. The tradition that surrounds Psalm 51 is that david wrote it after Nathan accused him of the terrible acts of adultery and the cover up of "legal murder" of Bathsheba's husband which followed. David is sorrowful and repentant, and knows that he has sinned against God – and only God:

"Have mercy on me, O God,

according to your unfailing love;
according to your great compassion
blot out my transgressions.
Wash away all my iniquity
and cleanse me from my sin.
For I know my transgressions,
and my sin is always before me.
Against you, you only, have I sinned
and done what is evil in your sight;
so you are right in your verdict
and justified when you judge.
Surely I was sinful at birth,
sinful from the time my mother conceived me.
Yet you desired faithfulness even in the womb;
you taught me wisdom in that secret place.
Cleanse me with hyssop, and I will be clean;
wash me, and I will be whiter than snow.
Let me hear joy and gladness;
let the bones you have crushed rejoice.
Hide your face from my sins
and blot out all my iniquity.
Create in me a pure heart, O God,
and renew a steadfast spirit within me.
Do not cast me from your presence
or take your Holy Spirit from me.
Restore to me the joy of your salvation
and grant me a willing spirit, to sustain me.
Then I will teach transgressors your ways,
so that sinners will turn back to you." (Psalm 51:1-13).

One of the most wonderful truths that emerge from this song of praise is the readiness and desire of David to "teach transgressors your ways"- he has experienced firsthand the bitter fruits of sin, and wants to teach others about the wonderful loving God who has mercy and forgives His children! David once again experience the "joy of your salvation" when he had been cleansed and made whole.

David then points us to the very heart of worship- worship that comes from a "contrite and broken heart". We so seldom weep or show sorrow for our sins, but

when we do we are given the privilege of some of the purest and highest forms of worship. We literally feel and experience the transforming and cleansing blood of the Savior!:

"You do not delight in sacrifice, or I would bring it;

you do not take pleasure in burnt offerings.

My sacrifice, O God, is a broken spirit;

a broken and contrite heart

you, God, will not despise." (Psalm 51;16-17)

The "back story" of Psalm 52 is the story of Doeg the Edomite (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Doeg_the_Edomite). Doeg was, according to the Wikipedia reference: *"an Edomite, chief herdsman to Saul, King of Israel. He is mentioned in the Hebrew Bible book of First Samuel, chapters 21 and 22, where he is depicted as responsible for the deaths of a large number of priests."* In 1 samuel 22, Saul is enraged against Abiathar, who came to David's aid. Doeg makes a point of telling Saul about Abiathar's actions, and Saul in a rage orders the priests of Nob killed for their part in this "treason". The Psalm asks the question of Does- and of all who propose to do evil, "why are you boasting about your evil deeds?":

"Why do you boast of evil, you mighty hero?
Why do you boast all day long,
you who are a disgrace in the eyes of God?
You who practice deceit,
your tongue plots destruction;
it is like a sharpened razor.
You love evil rather than good,
falsehood rather than speaking the truth.[i]
You love every harmful word,
you deceitful tongue!
Surely God will bring you down to everlasting ruin:
He will snatch you up and pluck you from your tent;
he will uproot you from the land of the living.
The righteous will see and fear;
they will laugh at you, saying,
"Here now is the man
who did not make God his stronghold
but trusted in his great wealth
and grew strong by destroying others!" (Psalm 52:1-7).

The hand of God Himself will bring these evildoers down to "everlasting ruin", but they do not see- or believe- this truth.

David contrasts himself, and his lifelong love of, and dependence on God with this evil one:

"But I am like an olive tree
flourishing in the house of God;
I trust in God's unfailing love
for ever and ever.
For what you have done I will always praise you

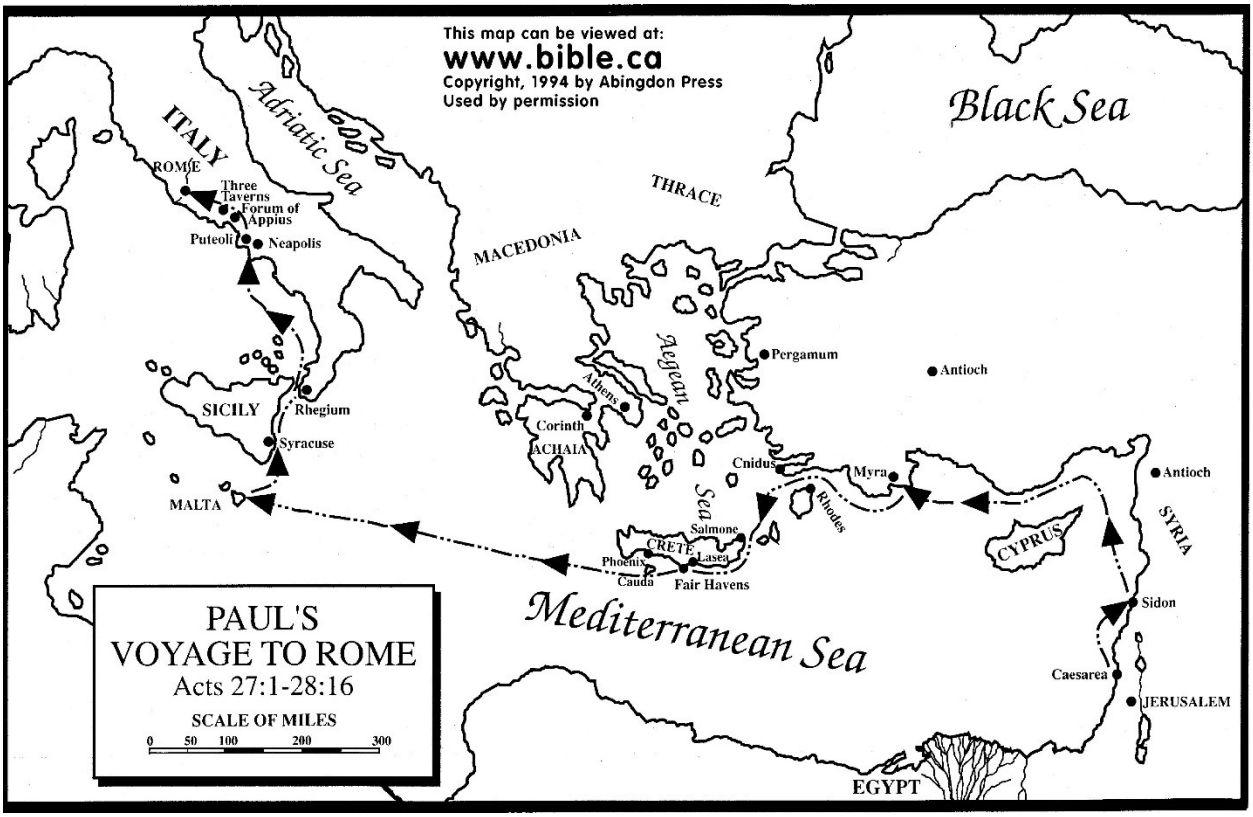
in the presence of your faithful people.
And I will hope in your name,
for your name is good." (Psalm 52:8-9)

Acts 27:1-25

Paul encountered kindness on his journey to Rome, in the person of the centurion Julius. This centurion kindly allowed Paul's friends to attend to his needs before the long journey to Rome. *"When it was decided that we would sail for Italy, Paul and some other prisoners were handed over to a centurion named Julius, who belonged to the Imperial Regiment. We boarded a ship from Adramyttium about to sail for ports along the coast of the province of Asia, and we put out to sea. Aristarchus, a Macedonian from Thessalonica, was with us. The next day we landed at Sidon; and Julius, in kindness to Paul, allowed him to go to his friends so they might provide for his needs."* (Acts 27:1-3) God finds so many ways to bless us and let us know that we are in His loving care!

Then the journey became truly interesting- a huge storm arose along the way. We must remember that the ships of those days were relatively small, and that a storm at seas represented a serious threat. Those on board with Paul and the other prisoners naturally feared for their lives, but Paul was able to comfort them. He was visited by and angel of the Lord, who told Paul they would not be harmed and that he, Paul, would indeed testify in Rome: *"Before very long, a wind of hurricane force, called the Northeaster, swept down from the island. The ship was caught by the storm and could not head into the wind; so we gave way to it and were driven along. As we passed to the lee of a small island called Cauda, we were hardly able to make the lifeboat secure, so the men hoisted it aboard. Then they passed ropes under the ship itself to hold it together. Because they were afraid they would run aground on the sandbars of Syrtis, they lowered the sea anchor and let the ship be driven along. We took such a violent battering from the storm that the next day they began to throw the cargo overboard. On the third day, they threw the ship's tackle overboard with their own hands. When neither sun nor stars appeared for many days and the storm continued raging, we finally gave up all hope of being saved. After they had gone a long time without food, Paul stood up before them and said: "Men, you should have taken my advice not to sail from Crete; then you would have spared yourselves this damage and loss. But now I urge you to keep up your courage, because not one of you will be lost; only the ship will be destroyed. Last night an angel of the God to whom I belong and whom I serve stood beside me and said, 'Do not be afraid, Paul. You must stand trial before Caesar; and God has graciously given you the lives of all who sail with you.' So keep up your courage, men, for I have faith in God that it will happen just as he told me. Nevertheless, we must run aground on some island."* (Acts 21:14-26).

The problem was, to save the lives of the men aboard, the ship must be deliberately run aground and abandoned. I have wonderd if Paul wanted to say "I told you so" to the centurion who insisted that they keep sailing!



Psalm 53-55 **July 28, 2014** **Acts 27:26-44**

One of the most trivial examples of “proof texting” – selecting a Scripture out of context to make a point in a discussion or argument- is found in Psalm 53. The “proof text” is “there is no God” (Psalm 53:1b), and the context, which essentially “proves” the opposite is:

“The fool says in his heart,
“There is no God.”
They are corrupt, and their ways are vile;
there is no one who does good.”(Psalm 53:1)

The Psalmist is clearly saying that all wisdom, all knowledge and righteousness begin with the right relationship with God- one that is vibrant, growing and intimate. This is the source of all wisdom (Proverbs 1:7; 9:10, Psalm 110:10)

God “looks down from heaven” and sees that:

“Everyone has turned away, all have become corrupt;
there is no one who does good,
not even one.” (Psalm 53:3)

Later Paul says the same thing (Romans 3:23)- we have ALL siined and come short of the glory of God! What is the hope that we have? What can change our hearts and transform the sin nature into a Godly nature? Only a Savior can do what we cannot do, and would not do on our own. The hint of this savior is given in the last verses of Psalm 53:

Oh, that salvation for Israel would come out of Zion!
When God restores his people,
let Jacob rejoice and Israel be glad! (Psalm 53:6)

The glorious good news is that the salvation that is promised in this verse "when God restores" has come and is available to all! His Name be praised.

Run! Hide! Save me, Lord from my enemies! This was the life that David led during the relentless pursuit of King Saul. David feared for his very life, and was forced by circumstance to either trust God or give up all hope. David knew he was anointed to be the King, and that God's Spirit was upon him. He did not believe that his enemies would triumph in an ultimate way- and yet the real, day to day life that he experiences was one of constant peril.

"Save me, O God, by your name;
vindicate me by your might.
Hear my prayer, O God;
listen to the words of my mouth.
Arrogant foes are attacking me;
ruthless people are trying to kill me—
people without regard for God.[f]
Surely God is my help;
the Lord is the one who sustains me." (Psalm 54:1-4)

God's Name is powerful and protective. He is Jehovah-Sabaoth- "The Lord of Hosts, our Protector" (http://www.holybible.com/resources/names_of_lord.htm).

David turns to God- his Source of help and protection, and pledges to sacrifice and follow His direction, trusting Him for the protection that any He can provide:

"Let evil recoil on those who slander me;
in your faithfulness destroy them.
I will sacrifice a freewill offering to you;
I will praise your name, Lord, for it is good.
You have delivered me from all my troubles,
and my eyes have looked in triumph on my foes."(Psalm 54:5-7)

The Psalms have provided so many metaphors and poetic descriptions that have permeated our language and culture. Certainly music- especially worship and praise music- has been written either rephrasing a Psalm or using one of the vivid "word pictures" found in so much of this amazing poetry. Many of Jane Marshall's wonderful choral works are based on the Psalms- there are many other examples as well. (see http://www.freechurchmusic.com/list.asp?choosevoicing=Psalm; http://cardiphonia.org/2011/08/22/contemporary-psalms-for-worship/)

Two songs come to my mind in reading and meditating on Psalm 55: "I'll fly Away" (Albert E. Brumley 1929) and "On the Wings of a Dove" (Bob Ferguson 1958). The Wings of a Dove *"...alludes to several passages from the Christian Bible about doves sent by the Lord, including a verse about God sending Noah a dove during the flood*

in Genesis 8:6-12, and another passage about a dove in Matthew 3:16 where "After his baptism, as Jesus came up out of the water, the heavens were opened and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and settling on him." (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wings_of_a_Dove_(Bob_Ferguson_song)).

The Psalmist/David pleads with God to let him escape the relentless pursuit of his enemies:

"Listen to my prayer, O God,
do not ignore my plea;
hear me and answer me.
My thoughts trouble me and I am distraught
because of what my enemy is saying,
because of the threats of the wicked;
for they bring down suffering on me
and assail me in their anger.

My heart is in anguish within me;
the terrors of death have fallen on me.
Fear and trembling have beset me;
horror has overwhelmed me.
I said, "Oh, that I had the wings of a dove!
I would fly away and be at rest.
I would flee far away
and stay in the desert
I would hurry to my place of shelter,
far from the tempest and storm." (Psalm 55:1-8)

David bemoans the treachery of "friends" who have their own agendas and cannot be trusted:
"My companion attacks his friends;
he violates his covenant.
His talk is smooth as butter,
yet war is in his heart;
his words are more soothing than oil,
yet they are drawn swords." (Psalm 55:20-21).
Ultimately the only true friend and ally that David has is the Lord:
"Cast your cares on the Lord
and he will sustain you;
he will never let
the righteous be shaken.
But you, God, will bring down the wicked
into the pit of decay;
the bloodthirsty and deceitful

will not live out half their days.
But as for me, I trust in you." (Psalm 55:22-23)

Acts 27:26-44

Then comes the "shipwreck". The boat was small, the sea large, raging and threatening with a storm. Yet Paul had been given the assurance that they would all reach land safely. This is certainly a great and illustrative example of the "faith" described in Hebrews 11:1 "Now faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see." Paul and his companions and captors certainly did not "see" the safe outcome, but they had hope for and assurance of their safe passage based on Paul's vision and visitation by a messenger angel.

Since they had not eaten in several days, Paul made the practical suggestion that they eat to fortify themselves: *"Just before dawn Paul urged them all to eat. "For the last fourteen days," he said, "you have been in constant suspense and have gone without food—you haven't eaten anything. Now I urge you to take some food. You need it to survive. Not one of you will lose a single hair from his head." After he said this, he took some bread and gave thanks to God in front of them all. Then he broke it and began to eat. They were all encouraged and ate some food themselves. Altogether there were 276 of us on board. When they had eaten as much as they wanted, they lightened the ship by throwing the grain into the sea."* (Acts 27:33-38).

They then ran aground on a sandbar (at the Island of Malta) and the ship started to break up in the storm. The "knee jerk" reaction of the Roman captors was to kill all the prisoners so they would not escape, but they were persuaded to allow everyone to either swim ashore or cling to a plank "life raft" and float ashore- and they all reached land safely, just as God's messenger told them they would: *"The soldiers planned to kill the prisoners to prevent any of them from swimming away and escaping. But the centurion wanted to spare Paul's life and kept them from carrying out their plan. He ordered those who could swim to jump overboard first and get to land. The rest were to get there on planks or on other pieces of the ship. In this way everyone reached land safely.* (Acts 27:42-44)

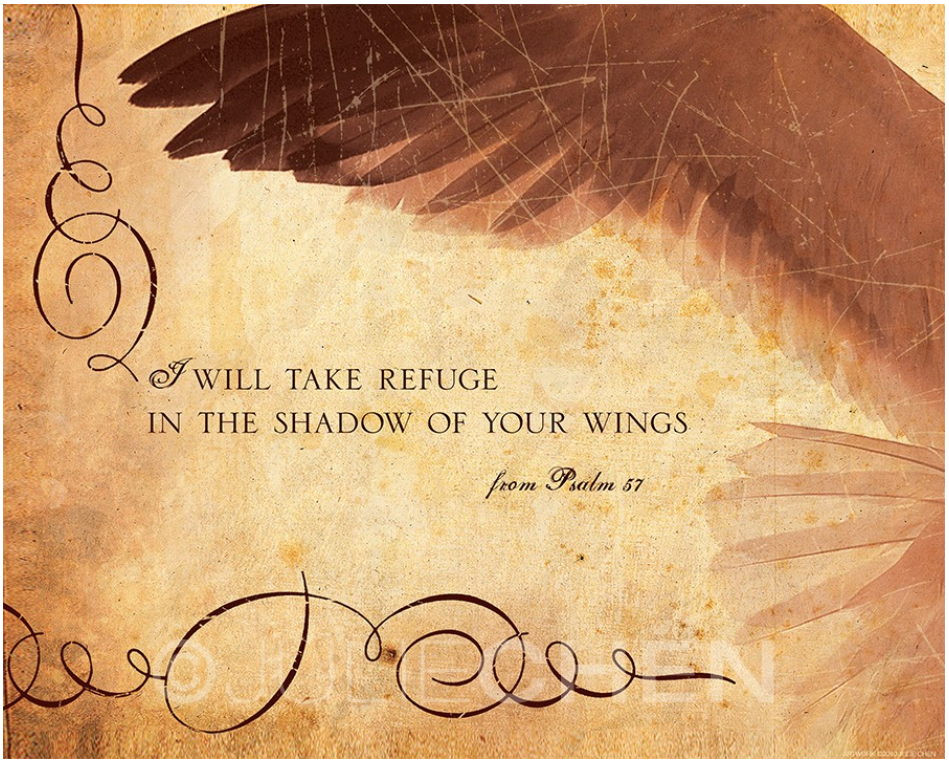
Psalm 56-58 July 29, 2014 Acts 28:1-15

David is again being hotly pursued by Saul. Sauls' jealousy and insanity prodded him to an almost mindless and reflexive hunt for David. God used David's peril to teach him over and over that he could depend on his God for protection. David asks God to 'count his tears"- surely God sees how distressed and afraid David is…and just after that declaration David receives reassurance from God:
"Record my misery;
list my tears on your scroll—
are they not in your record?
Then my enemies will turn back
when I call for help.
By this I will know that God is for me.

In God, whose word I praise,
in the Lord, whose word I praise—
in God I trust and am not afraid.
What can man do to me?" (Psalm 56:8-11)
David then offers thanksgiving and praise to God for His mighty protective hand:
"I am under vows to you, my God;
I will present my thank offerings to you.
For you have delivered me from death
and my feet from stumbling,
that I may walk before God
in the light of life." (Psalm 56:12-13)

The "marginal notes" added by translators are not Scripture, but they often add color and context to the Sciptures. Such is the case ion Psalms 57 and 58. Both of these Psalms are attrinbuted to David, and both are sung to the same tune. One might wonder if these two Psalms would be sung in succession during worship: "For the director of music. To the tune of "Do Not Destroy." Of David. A miktam. When he had fled from Saul into the cave." (Notes for Psalm 57) "For the director of music. To the tune of "Do Not Destroy." Of David. A miktam." (Notes for Psalm 58) The meaning of the Hebrew work "miktam" is not clear- the translators suggest it is either a literary or music term
*(*http://www.studylight.org/commentaries/bcc/view.cgi?bk=18&ch=57*)*

David cries out to God from his heart, and asks God once again to save him- he yearns for the protection of God and to rest under "your wings":
"Have mercy on me, my God, have mercy on me,
for in you I take refuge.
I will take refuge in the shadow of your wings
until the disaster has passed." (Psalm 57:1)



Julie Chen (http://pickyourportion.com/2013/09/12/the-shadow-of-your-wings/)

The metaphor here reminds us of one Jesus used in reference to His people (Matthew 23:37): *"Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you were not willing."* (NIV)

True faith- faith that is built on the bedrock of God's love and our experience of God's love- allows us to "sing with joy" in the midst of trials. David sings and gives praise and glory to God even though he is constantly fleeing for his life:

"My heart, O God, is steadfast,
my heart is steadfast;
I will sing and make music.
Awake, my soul!
Awake, harp and lyre!
I will awaken the dawn.
I will praise you, Lord, among the nations;
I will sing of you among the peoples.
For great is your love, reaching to the heavens;
your faithfulness reaches to the skies.
Be exalted, O God, above the heavens;
let your glory be over all the earth." (Psalm 57:7-11)

David then cries out in frustration and protest to God- whu has God allowed these "evil" rulers to stay in power and exercdise their destructive power over the innocent? David petitions God to judge these He has allowed to reign, and bring His justice:

"Do you rulers indeed speak justly?

Do you judge people with equity?

No, in your heart you devise injustice,

and your hands mete out violence on the earth.

Even from birth the wicked go astray;

from the womb they are wayward, spreading lies.

Their venom is like the venom of a snake,

like that of a cobra that has stopped its ears,

that will not heed the tune of the charmer,

however skillful the enchanter may be." (Psalm 58:1-5)

The raw emotion of the Psalms has disturbed some students of the Bible- they simply don't understand, or are disturbed by, the pure anger and frustration, and even desire for revenge that is sen in the Psalms. The Bible is an accurate record and mirror of our selves- nothing is "off limits"! The God of Heaven is neither surprised nor threatened by the emotions of His people:

"Break the teeth in their mouths, O God;

Lord, tear out the fangs of those lions!

Let them vanish like water that flows away;

when they draw the bow, let their arrows fall short.

May they be like a slug that melts away as it moves along,

like a stillborn child that never sees the sun." (Psalm 58:6-8)

This anger in God's people seldom even meets the standard of "righteous anger"- anger at the sin and not the sinner. The anger here is clearly at and with the sinner- the unrighteous. God patiently listens to our true hearts, and then works His wonderful will in and through- and sometimes despite us!

David even "butters up" God by saying that if God acts in the desired way- eliminating the unjust rulers- then people will notice Him and say "good things" about Him:

Then people will say,

"Surely the righteous still are rewarded;

surely there is a God who judges the earth." (Psalm 58:11)

Happy is the man who accepts God's will and actions and does not try to "manipulate them"!

Acts 28:1-15

Snake!! The very word strikes fear and terror in the hearts of so many. Wasn't Satan a "snake" in the Garden of Eden? Paul lands with his companions, cold and wet, just having been saved from a storm, and they are warming themselves on the shore with a fire. Suddenly, a poisonous snake appears in the firewood and bites Paul- surely this is a death sentence: *"Once safely on shore, we found out that the island was called Malta. The islanders showed us unusual kindness. They built a fire and welcomed us all because it was raining and cold. Paul gathered a pile of brushwood and, as he put it on the fire, a viper, driven out by the heat, fastened itself on his hand. When the islanders saw the snake hanging from his hand, they said to each other, "This man must be a murderer; for though he escaped from the sea, the goddess Justice has not allowed him to live." But Paul shook the snake off into the fire and suffered no ill effects. The people expected him to swell up or suddenly fall dead; but after waiting a long time and seeing nothing unusual happen to him, they changed their minds and said he was a god."* (Acts 28:1-6)

Several things are worthy of notice here. The word "we" in verse 1 suggests that the writer had accompanied Paul on this long journey- Luke in this case, who was the author of both Luke and Acts. The judgment of the "pagan Maltans" is striking in two different ways- they wrongly believed that Paul was bitten because he was a criminal deserving punishment, and then believed he was a "god" because he did not die from the poisonous snake bite. They were in error on both counts- illustrating how needy these persons- and many others- were for the truth of the Gospel!

The chief official of the island seems to be Roman, at least his name "Publius" is a Roman one, and he and his fellow islanders were very hospiyable to this shipwrecked party: *"There was an estate nearby that belonged to Publius, the chief official of the island. He welcomed us to his home and showed us generous hospitality for three days. His father was sick in bed, suffering from fever and dysentery. Paul went in to see him and, after prayer, placed his hands on him and healed him. When this had happened, the rest of the sick on the island came and were cured. They honored us in many ways; and when we were ready to sail, they furnished us with the supplies we needed."* (Acts 28:7-10) Paul healed and showed clearly the power of the Holy Spirit- I am cetain this made an indelible mark on those who were healed and many who witnessed these healings.

This section of Acts ends with a description of the journey's resumption in a "borrowed ship" and the warm greeting Paul received on his arrival in Rome*: "After three months we put out to sea in a ship that had wintered in the island—it was an Alexandrian ship with the figurehead of the twin gods Castor and Pollux. We put in at Syracuse and stayed there three days. From there we set sail and arrived at Rhegium. The next day the south wind came up, and on the following day we reached Puteoli. There we found some brothers and sisters who invited us to spend a week with them. And so we came to Rome. The brothers and sisters there had*

heard that we were coming, and they traveled as far as the Forum of Appius and the Three Taverns to meet us. At the sight of these people Paul thanked God and was encouraged." (Acts 28:11-15) God always finds ways to encourage His people- here by the restoration of fellowship with Paul.

Psalm 59-61 July 30, 2014 Acts 28:16-31

Once again David is in peril. Saul has surrounded the city David is in, and threatens to capture him at any moment. Once again the tune is "Do Not Destroy", and the danger is very real. David describes his tenuous situation:

"Deliver me from my enemies, O God;
be my fortress against those who are attacking me.
Deliver me from evildoers
and save me from those who are after my blood.
See how they lie in wait for me!
Fierce men conspire against me
for no offense or sin of mine, LORD.
I have done no wrong, yet they are ready to attack me.
Arise to help me; look on my plight!
You, LORD God Almighty,
you who are the God of Israel,
rouse yourself to punish all the nations;
show no mercy to wicked traitors.[c]
They return at evening,
snarling like dogs,
and prowl about the city." (Psalm 59:1-6)

Yet David has every confidence that Gos will once again deliver him from his enemies- and Saul in particular. God will triumph over David's enemies still again:

"But you laugh at them, Lord;
you scoff at all those nations.
You are my strength, I watch for you;
you, God, are my fortress,
my God on whom I can rely.
God will go before me

and will let me gloat over those who slander me.

But do not kill them, Lord our shield,

or my people will forget.

In your might uproot them

and bring them down." (Psalm 59:8-11)

God is the strong fortress, the force for good that david has learned he can rely on, and he praises God for this:

"You are my strength, I sing praise to you;

you, God, are my fortress,

my God on whom I can rely." (Psalm 59:17)

God has been given many names in Scripture that reflect His attributes and personality, and His great acts on behalf of His people. In this Psalm we see a reference to God as "banner" or Jehovah Nissi:

"You have rejected us, God, and burst upon us;

you have been angry—now restore us!

2 You have shaken the land and torn it open;

mend its fractures, for it is quaking.

3 You have shown your people desperate times;

you have given us wine that makes us stagger.

4 But for those who fear you, you have raised a banner

to be unfurled against the bow." (Psalm 60:1-4)

The Names of God (http://christianitymalaysia.com/wp/identity-god-expressed-names/)

Even though the Psalmist feels that God has rejected him and His people, he attests to the might of God as victory is obtained:

"Who will bring me to the fortified city?

Who will lead me to Edom?

Is it not you, God, you who have now rejected us

and no longer go out with our armies?

Give us aid against the enemy,

for human help is worthless.

With God we will gain the victory,

and he will trample down our enemies." (Psalm 60:9-12).

It is easy to praise and giver thanks to God when things are going well- the real test of our love for God is when we praise Him even in the midst of herdship and trials.

The praise song based on Proverbs 18:10 starts: "*The name of the LORD is a strong tower; the righteous man runs into it and is safe."* This same sentiment is reflected on by the Psalmist as he describes that fortress and refuge that God is and provides to His people:

"Hear my cry, O God;

listen to my prayer.

From the ends of the earth I call to you,

I call as my heart grows faint;

lead me to the rock that is higher than I.

For you have been my refuge,

a strong tower against the foe." (Psalm 61:1-3)

The tower was part of the fortified city- its defenses included thick walls and strong gates- these images often find their way into Scripture as the protection and safety that God provides are described. The Scriptures used the language, images and experiences of the prople to express timeless truths, just as we illustrate the Scriptures today with modern images that are in keeping with our experiences of God.

The Psalmist then praises God- declares Him to be the source of strength and long years:

"I long to dwell in your tent forever

and take refuge in the shelter of your wings.

For you, God, have heard my vows;

you have given me the heritage of those who fear your name.

Increase the days of the king's life,

his years for many generations.

May he be enthroned in God's presence forever;

appoint your love and faithfulness to protect him.

Then I will ever sing in praise of your name

and fulfill my vows day after day." (Psalm 61:4-8)

Note the use of the image "shelter of your wings". This is one of many images in Scripture in which a "feminine" quality or attribute is given to God. The truly patriarchal society allowed for occasional tributes to the strength and leadership and godliness of women, as we see in the Scriptural account of Judges in which the Judge Deborah and the courageous Jael (Judges 5) exhibit their remarkable strength and character.

Acts 28:16-31

So Paul finally reaches Rome. There is no Scriptural record of Paul ever having visited Spain, which he stated was a desire of his heart (Romans 15:24). Can we then say that Paul was a "failure"? Certainly by the world's standards, we might

say so. Similar comments have been made about the Lord Himself in the musical "For Heavens Sake":

Some Career

He was a flop at 33.

His whole career was one of failure and of loss

The thing that's most distressful

Is he could have been successful

But, instead of climbing up, he climbed a cross.

He was a flop at 33.

He jumped from carpentry to preaching to the mob.

He never was adjusted

He spend his whole life busted

He never got promoted on the job.

Paul's true mission- the one to which he had been called- was to be a powerful witness, a persuader, a reasoned, and to courageously illustrate what a total "sold out" life looks like. He was give an opportunity- this time in Rome- to proclaim the saving power of the gospel.
Three days later he called together the local Jewish leaders. When they had assembled, Paul said to them: *"My brothers, although I have done nothing against our people or against the customs of our ancestors, I was arrested in Jerusalem and handed over to the Romans. They examined me and wanted to release me, because I was not guilty of any crime deserving death. The Jews objected, so I was compelled to make an appeal to Caesar. I certainly did not intend to bring any charge against my own people. For this reason I have asked to see you and talk with you. It is because of the hope of Israel that I am bound with this chain." They replied, "We have not received any letters from Judea concerning you, and none of our people who have come from there has reported or said anything bad about you. But we want to hear what your views are, for we know that people everywhere are talking against this sect."*
They arranged to meet Paul on a certain day, and came in even larger numbers to the place where he was staying. He witnessed to them from morning till evening, explaining about the kingdom of God, and from the Law of Moses and from the Prophets he tried to persuade them about Jesus." (Acts 28:17-23)

The book of the Acts of the Apostles (Or as I prefer, The Acts of the Holy Spirit!) ends with this statement, a summary of what Paul – and others- were called to and made able to do with the power of the Holy Spirit: *"For two whole years Paul stayed*

there in his own rented house and welcomed all who came to see him. He proclaimed the kingdom of God and taught about the Lord Jesus Christ—with all boldness and without hindrance!" (Acts 28:30-31) OH that we would have the courage of conviction, persecution, and fire of these who literally changed the world!

Psalm 62-64 July 31, 2014 Romans 1

Rest, security, and the power to do good things- these are some of the benefits of the believer who trusts and rests in God. David has experienced each of these as he trusts God for "every good thing" (James 1:17). He describes his faith in the God who protects and provides shelter:

"Truly my soul finds rest in God;
my salvation comes from him.
Truly he is my rock and my salvation;
he is my fortress, I will never be shaken.
How long will you assault me?
Would all of you throw me down—
this leaning wall, this tottering fence?
Surely they intend to topple me
from my lofty place;
they take delight in lies.
With their mouths they bless,
but in their hearts they curse." (Psalm 62:1-4)

The enemies of God- and of David- arte two-faced. They say one thing and believe another- they bless the King to his face and curse him in their hearts!
David concludes this Psalm/song with praise for the power of God- he can do the good things that are needed for His children. David also uses a poetic device seen many other places in Scripture- he repeats a thought with slightly different wording- here for emphasis:

"One thing God has spoken,
two things I have heard:
"Power belongs to you, God,
and with you, Lord, is unfailing love";
and, "You reward everyone
according to what they have done." (Psalm 62:11-12)

"One thing God has spoken; two things I have heard" repeats a theme with slightly different wording so that the hearer. God is the perfect communicator- he wants to make certain that we hear His word!

So many of the Psalms are the subject and inspiration of popular "praise and worship" songs. Psalm 63 is no exception. The Psalm begins with these words, similar to those in Psalm 42:

"You, God, are my God,
earnestly I seek you;
I thirst for you,
my whole being longs for you,
in a dry and parched land

where there is no water." (Psalm 63:1)

Better Than Life (by Acapella)
In a dry and weary land where is no water
My soul is thirsting for you
I have seen you in the sanctuary
Beheld your power and glory
My lips will glorify you
I will praise you as long as I live
In your name I will lift up my hands

Chorus:
Your love is better than life
Your love is better than life
Earnestly I seek you
My soul is thirsting for you
Cause your love is better than life

David assures us that God's love is indeed "better than life", and that the highest form of human activity is praising our God:
"I have seen you in the sanctuary
and beheld your power and your glory.
Because your love is better than life,
my lips will glorify you.
I will praise you as long as I live,
and in your name I will lift up my hands.
I will be fully satisfied as with the richest of foods;
with singing lips my mouth will praise you." (Psalm 63:2-5)

David is assured by God and from his experience with God that his enemies' lies will be silenced tand that they will be overcome and defeated- simply because of David's trust and dependence on God's power:
"Those who want to kill me will be destroyed;
they will go down to the depths of the earth.
They will be given over to the sword
and become food for jackals.
But the king will rejoice in God;
all who swear by God will glory in him,
while the mouths of liars will be silenced." (Psalm 63:9-11)

Those who have experienced combat tell us several things worth noting- they describe the constant anxiety, the sometimes overwhelming desire to flee to a "safe place" and to keep their "head down" as mucgh as possible, and the "desperation conversions" that sometimes occur. The saying goes that there are "no atheists in foxholes"- the reality of sudden death makes most of us reach out to God.

David spent much of his adult life fleeing from enemies, trusting God for protection, and sometimes fearing and wondering if any given day would be his last. David's faith. Though, was not a "situational" or "desperation" faith- David's faith, trust and total dependence on God was the result of years spent loving and trusting God- and seeing His mighty hand in action in both blessing and deliverance. David calls out to God:

"Hear me, my God, as I voice my complaint;

protect my life from the threat of the enemy.

2 Hide me from the conspiracy of the wicked,

from the plots of evildoers.

3 They sharpen their tongues like swords

and aim cruel words like deadly arrows.

4 They shoot from ambush at the innocent;

they shoot suddenly, without fear." (Psalm 64:1-4)

David had the confidence to know that God would hear him and would protect him still again!

The enemies of God, who "shoot from ambush at the innocent" will be brought down, and those righteous ones who trust and love God will obtain protection:

"The righteous will rejoice in the Lord

and take refuge in him;

all the upright in heart will glory in him!" (Psalm 64:10)

Romans 1

Paul preached, taught, traveled all ovber the known world, and planted churches. Once he planted a church, it was his "labor of love" to nurture and enclurage these families of believers, and occasionally correct them when they needed correction. Such was certainlt the case in the church at Rome. Rome was then the center of the civilization that dominated the Mediterranean and surrounding areas for many years. It was critical that a flourishing and growing church be planted and sustained here.

Pauls' letter to the church in Rome is the source of much of what scholars refer to as Pauline theology. Since Paul was not only an active church planter but also a prolific writer, and since much of his writing has been put into canon Scripture, his theology is certainly worthy of personal study and the finest scholarship. We have an early introduction into some of Pauline theology in this first letter to the Roman church. The themes are:

1) Paul's introduction and listing of his credentials
2) Assurance of the calling of the Gentiles
3) Paul's prayers for, and longing to be with those in Rome;

4) Paul's confidence in the power and effectiveness of the Gospel
5) God's righteous outrage at the "wicked"

First Paul introduces himself (or more correctly reminds his readers of his qualifications and calling):

"Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle and set apart for the gospel of God— the gospel he promised beforehand through his prophets in the Holy Scriptures regarding his Son, who as to his earthly life was a descendant of David, and who through the Spirit of holiness was appointed the Son of God in power by his resurrection from the dead: Jesus Christ our Lord." (Romans 1:1-4)

Here I would like to make one of what will likely be several comments about "higher criticism". Some academicians, and sadly, some preachers and teachers, seem to take great delight in casting aspersion and doubt on some of the "traditional" beliefs and views of Scripture that have been a part of more conservative theology over the years. Higher criticism at its heart reserves the "right" to criticize the authority and intergrity of Scripture, and attempts to judge the Scripture itself from a strictly "human" point of view. Once such example in this passage is the "criticism" of the traditional authorship of some of the letters in the New Testament. According to Wikipedia*: "While many scholars uphold the traditional view, some question whether the first three (the list is Romans, 1 and 2 Corinthians), called the "Deutero-Pauline Epistles," are authentic letters of Paul. As for the latter three, the "Pastoral epistles" (the list is 1 and 2 Timothy and Titus), there are many scholars that uphold the traditional view of these as the genuine writings of the Apostle Paul."* (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/New_Testament#Pauline_epistles_2)

Even though the very first word of this letter identifies the author as Paul, these scholars would have us believe that this authorship is "falsely attributed", based on their exhaustive examination of the grammar, style and sentence construction of the "authentic" Pauline letters. The foolishness of this approach almost defies understanding. Many authors exhibit varied styles, often styles and word usage evolve over time. To say that the letter to the Romans is "inconsistent" with other (presumably genuine) Pauline letters is absurd!

Paul assures the Gentiles that they are equally called- that they are as precious to God as His covenant people- the Jews*: "I long to see you so that I may impart to you some spiritual gift to make you strong— that is, that you and I may be mutually encouraged by each other's faith. I do not want you to be unaware, brothers and sisters, that I planned many times to come to you (but have been prevented from doing so until now) in order that I might have a harvest among you, just as I have had among the other Gentiles. I am obligated both to Greeks and non-Greeks, both to the wise and the foolish. That is why I am so eager to preach the gospel also to you who are in Rome."* (Romans 1:11-15)

Paul then alludes to the power of the Gospel: *"For I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes: first to the Jew, then to the Gentile. For in the gospel the righteousness of God is revealed—a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: "The righteous will live by faith."* (Romans 1:16-17 quoting Hab 2:4). Paul sees the Gospel as universal- Good News to all of God's children whatever their point of origin spiritually or culturally!

Then Paul launches into a long and detailed description of the anger- the wrath- of God against certain immoral, sinful practices. (Romans 1:18-32) These are not "new" to human behavior, but they have hardly been criticized and condemned as vigorously as here ever before. There is a segment of our "modern" society" that would have us to ignore or question the validity of these condemnations, simply out of an agenda to create a "normalcy" for sins of all description. This is especially true with the issue of homosexuality. Paul condemns the practice of homosexuality here vigorously and clearly, both among women (Romans 1:26) and men (Romans 1:27). Paul describes the practice of "inventing ways of doing evil" (Romans 1:30). Paul clearly states that these who practice such actuivities have "no excuse" (Romans 1:20). Here we have mankind setting up their "own standards" and defying- or worse still ignoring, the clear teachings from God as to His expectations and judgments on our behavior. We even go so far as to "approve" such behavior (Romans 1:32). How far we have fallen as a "modern society"! May God have mercy on us all!

Psalm 65-67 August 1, 2014 Romans 2

Psalm 65 is another of the Davidic psalms, and reflects the character and experience of the author. Sometimes we focus so much on the sins and shortcomings of avid that we forget that he was a righteous, powerful, and loving leader of his people, and a man described by God Himself as "a man after my own heart" (Acts 13:22). David praises God for His answering the prayers of the people, and for the richness of the worship that he inhabits:

"Praise awaits you, our God, in Zion;

to you our vows will be fulfilled.

You who answer prayer,

to you all people will come.

When we were overwhelmed by sins,

you forgave[c] our transgressions.

Blessed are those you choose

and bring near to live in your courts!

We are filled with the good things of your house,

of your holy temple." (Psalm 65:1-4)

David then describes the "awesome deeds of God" and His cae and shepherding not only of the people but also the land that he promised and gave them:

"You answer us with awesome and righteous deeds,

God our Savior,

the hope of all the ends of the earth

and of the farthest seas,

who formed the mountains by your power,

having armed yourself with strength,

who stilled the roaring of the seas,

the roaring of their waves,

and the turmoil of the nations.

The whole earth is filled with awe at your wonders;

where morning dawns, where evening fades,

you call forth songs of joy." (Psalm 65:5-8)

Life giving water…water to make the land fertile and productive…this precious water is among the many giftst that God generously bestows on His people:

"You care for the land and water it;

you enrich it abundantly.

The streams of God are filled with water

to provide the people with grain,

for so you have ordained it.

You drench its furrows and level its ridges;

you soften it with showers and bless its crops.

You crown the year with your bounty,

and your carts overflow with abundance.

The grasslands of the wilderness overflow;

the hills are clothed with gladness.

The meadows are covered with flocks

and the valleys are mantled with grain;

they shout for joy and sing." (Psalm 65:9-13)

I am reminded as I meditate on these verses of Jesus, who declared in John 7 that He was the source of "living water" (https://www.biblegateway.com/resources/commentaries/IVP-NT/John/Jesus-Source-Living-Water-All)

http://lnkministries.org/en/projects/living_water_project

Pure praise…and God has promised that He will inhabit the praise of His people (Psalm 22:3). The psalmist is filled with the joy of the very presence of the Lord:

"Shout for joy to God, all the earth!

Sing the glory of his name;

make his praise glorious.

Say to God, "How awesome are your deeds!

So great is your power

that your enemies cringe before you.

All the earth bows down to you;

they sing praise to you,

they sing the praises of your name." (Psalm 66:1-4)

The psalm/song then is separated into two separate and complementary sections: 1) the psalmist bids us to "come and see" what God has done (Psalm 66:5-15); and then 2) "come and hear" what God has done for the psalmist. So God is praised first for his very nature- glory and power, then for what He has done among the people "Come and see what God has done, his awesome deeds for mankind!" (Psalm 66:5); and then for the psalmist himself as he gives personal testimony: "Come and hear, all you who fear God; let me tell you what he has done for me." (Psalm 66:16).

So God is (correctly) seen in three different settings, each of which reflect some of the multifaceted character and activities of the Lord. Lest we ever feel we have "defined" or "captured" God, we need this reminder that He is both beyond our understanding and comprehension yet eager to share and reveal Himself to us!

Psalm 67 contains one of the many hints and foreshadowings in the Hebrew Scriptures (commonly called the Old Testament) of the salvation that God will bring, and is bringing, to His people. The Hebrew mind and theology, which saw God as inseparable "One", would naturally see God as Savior- which of course He is. The Christian reader, however, might well look at such passages as Psalm 67:1-2 and think immediately of the salvation brought to "the nations" through the sacrifice of Jesus:

"May God be gracious to us and bless us

and make his face shine on us—

so that your ways may be known on earth,

your salvation among all nations." (Psalm 67:1-2)

"Your salvation" (verse 2) certainly includes God's mercy- given to us instead of the judgment we deserve. The Christian understanding of this verse is broader, more personal and richer. Jesus Himself is our salvation…and He made it possible once and for all to be forgiven and cleansed of "all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:9)

I have never been a fan of "bumper sticker theology" (Honk if You Love Jesus!), and many others, but I am sometimes led to meditate on the sticker that says "Visualize World Peace". Israel as I write this is at war- again- with one of its neighbors- this time Hamas in the Gaza Strip. I have often wondered what this world would be like if "all the people" loved, honored and followed God's leadership in their lives. A partial vision like this is seen in tha latter part of Psalm 67:

"May the peoples praise you, God;

may all the peoples praise you.

May the nations be glad and sing for joy,

for you rule the peoples with equity

and guide the nations of the earth.

May the peoples praise you, God;

may all the peoples praise you.

The land yields its harvest;

God, our God, blesses us.

May God bless us still,

so that all the ends of the earth will fear him." (Psalm 67:3-7) When- and if- "all the ends of the earth" love and follow God- then there will be a real and lasting peace. Come quickly, Lord Jesus (Rev. 22:20.)!

Romans 2

Judgment is coming! We so many times would like to forget or "look the other way", but the Scriptures clearly teach that each of us is accountable for our sins. If this were the end of the story, we would be miserable creatures indeed, waiting and bracing ourselves for the onslaught of God's wrath to come: *"You, therefore, have no excuse, you who pass judgment on someone else, for at whatever point you judge another, you are condemning yourself, because you who pass judgment do*

the same things. Now we know that God's judgment against those who do such things is based on truth. So when you, a mere human being, pass judgment on them and yet do the same things, do you think you will escape God's judgment?" (Romans 2:1-3).

And it gets worse: *"But because of your stubbornness and your unrepentant heart, you are storing up wrath against yourself for the day of God's wrath, when his righteous judgment will be revealed. God "will repay each person according to what they have done." To those who by persistence in doing good seek glory, honor and immortality, he will give eternal life. But for those who are self-seeking and who reject the truth and follow evil, there will be wrath and anger. There will be trouble and distress for every human being who does evil: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile; but glory, honor and peace for everyone who does good: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile. For God does not show favoritism."* (Romans 2:5-11). Wow – "storing up wrath"- what a frightening reality- and no one, not even those who claimed (and sometimes still claim) a "special" place in God's heart because they are Jews- literal children of Abraham- no one will escape because God doesn't show any favoritism! We may remember that at times the Jews who opposed Jesus claimed righteousness based solely on their physical line of descent. Jesus saw right through this "cloak" of self righteousness: *"If you were Abraham's children, you would do the works of Abraham."* (John 8:39).

So, is the Gospel "Good News" or "Bad News"? Are we without hope, condemned to die in our sins and then be judged by a righteous God? Paul gives a partial answer in pointing out that those who "do the Law" and not simply hear it are righteous: *"For it is not those who hear the law who are righteous in God's sight, but it is those who obey the law who will be declared righteous. (Indeed, when Gentiles, who do not have the law, do by nature things required by the law, they are a law for themselves, even though they do not have the law. They show that the requirements of the law are written on their hearts, their consciences also bearing witness, and their thoughts sometimes accusing them and at other times even defending them.) This will take place on the day when God judges people's secrets through Jesus Christ, as my gospel declares."* (Romans 2:13-16)

But there is still a serious problem. As Paul points out next, it is not enough to follow the Law once in a while- the Law must be followed perfectly and completely*:"Now you, if you call yourself a Jew; if you rely on the law and boast in God; if you know his will and approve of what is superior because you are instructed by the law; if you are convinced that you are a guide for the blind, a light for those who are in the dark, an instructor of the foolish, a teacher of little children, because you have in the law the embodiment of knowledge and truth— you, then, who teach others, do you not teach yourself? You who preach against stealing, do you steal? You who say that people should not commit adultery, do you commit adultery? You who abhor idols, do you rob temples? You who boast in the law, do you dishonor God by breaking the law? As it is written: "God's name is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you."* (Romans 2:17-24).

There is a double problem here: 1) the Law is not being kept perfectly by those who should know and love it best; 2) the imperfect keeping of the law- the "stealing by those who teach others not to steal" (my paraphrase of Romans 2:21) is a blasphemy against God Himself- and a terrible witness to others- including the Gentiles!

So what's the solution to this problem? Paul hints at the solution in the next few verses, where he begins to talk about circumcision of the heart. This is similar to the teaching in Jeremiah 31, where God promises to "write His Law" on the hearts of His people (Jer. 31:33). Paul tells us: *"A person is not a Jew who is one only outwardly, nor is circumcision merely outward and physical. No, a person is a Jew who is one inwardly; and circumcision is circumcision of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the written code. Such a person's praise is not from other people, but from God."* (Romans 2:28-29). So a "real" Jew is one who has the Law inwardly in a "circumcised heart"!

Psalm 68-9 August 2, 2014 Romans 3

Psalm 68 is another of the many psalms attributed to David. In this Psalm he praises God for His love, protection and just dealings with His people. David has experienced and in this psalm extolls the joy that comes from one who is living in haromony with God's plan for their lives- the righteous ones. God is praised as the defender of the family, and even of the prisoner:

"May God arise, may his enemies be scattered;
may his foes flee before him.
May you blow them away like smoke—
as wax melts before the fire,
may the wicked perish before God.
But may the righteous be glad
and rejoice before God;
may they be happy and joyful.
Sing to God, sing in praise of his name,
extol him who rides on the clouds;
rejoice before him—his name is the Lord.
A father to the fatherless, a defender of widows,
is God in his holy dwelling.
God sets the lonely in families,
he leads out the prisoners with singing;
but the rebellious live in a sun-scorched land." (Psalm 68:1-6)

God is then praised for leading His people through the wilderness and providing water for their needs:

"When you, God, went out before your people,
when you marched through the wilderness,
the earth shook, the heavens poured down rain,

before God, the One of Sinai,

before God, the God of Israel.

You gave abundant showers, O God;

you refreshed your weary inheritance.

Your people settled in it,

and from your bounty, God, you provided for the poor." (Psalm 68:7-10)

God is then praised for His might in battle, as well as His might to save and be the Savior of His people:

"The chariots of God are tens of thousands

and thousands of thousands;

the Lord has come from Sinai into his sanctuary.[g]

When you ascended on high,

you took many captives;

you received gifts from people,

even from the rebellious—

that you, Lord God, might dwell there.

Praise be to the Lord, to God our Savior,

who daily bears our burdens.

Our God is a God who saves;

from the Sovereign Lord comes escape from death." (Psalm 68:17-20)

God is seen and praised as powerful- defeating His enemies and expecting (and receiving) tribute from the kings of the earth. God is also portrayed and praised as glorious in the Temple, worthy of praise and worship:

"Summon your power, God;
show us your strength, our God, as you have done before.
Because of your temple at Jerusalem
kings will bring you gifts.
Rebuke the beast among the reeds,
the herd of bulls among the calves of the nations.
Humbled, may the beast bring bars of silver.
Scatter the nations who delight in war.
Envoys will come from Egypt;
Cush will submit herself to God.
Sing to God, you kingdoms of the earth,
sing praise to the Lord,
to him who rides across the highest heavens, the ancient heavens,
who thunders with mighty voice.
Proclaim the power of God,
whose majesty is over Israel,

whose power is in the heavens.
You, God, are awesome in your sanctuary;
the God of Israel gives power and strength to his people.
Praise be to God!" (Psalm 68:28-35)

Psalm 68 focuses on the "big picture"- God's awesome power and relationship to the nation of Israel, and His victories over the enemies of Hid people- Psalm 69 is much more personal in tone and is a song of personal trust and victory over one person's pursuers and enemies. Again, the author is attributed to be David, who would know such struggles and trials very intimately.

"Save me, O God,
for the waters have come up to my neck.
2 I sink in the miry depths,
where there is no foothold.
I have come into the deep waters;
the floods engulf me.
3 I am worn out calling for help;
my throat is parched.
My eyes fail,
looking for my God.
4 Those who hate me without reason
outnumber the hairs of my head;
many are my enemies without cause,
those who seek to destroy me.
I am forced to restore
what I did not steal.
5 You, God, know my folly;
my guilt is not hidden from you.
6 Lord, the Lord Almighty,
may those who hope in you
not be disgraced because of me;
God of Israel,
may those who seek you
not be put to shame because of me." (Psalm 69:1-6)

David cries out to God to save him from those who hate him "without reason", as Saul did. The psalmist complains to God that his enemies are numerous they "outnumber the hairs of my head". Even though David knows there is sin in his own life "my folly; my guilt" he asks God for help so that those who love Him and hope in Him would not be "disgraced" or "put to shame". David is telling us that his success will be a positive testimony and witness to the people- whereas his failure would discourage those who seek God's face. It is clear that David realized that his personal fame brought him many witnesses, whose own faith and love of God would be harmed by David's failures!

David then tells us that even though he is "mocked" (verse 12) and "scorned" (verse 10), he will trust God for deliverance and salvation. God's saving David will be a sure sign to the people of His power and triumphant goodness:

“But I pray to you, Lord,
in the time of your favor;
in your great love, O God,
answer me with your sure salvation.
Rescue me from the mire,
do not let me sink;
deliver me from those who hate me,
from the deep waters.
Do not let the floodwaters engulf me
or the depths swallow me up
or the pit close its mouth over me.” (Psalm 69:13-15)

God’s salvation will change everything- He will rescue David and His people as well- he is worthy of our praise:
“But as for me, afflicted and in pain—
may your salvation, God, protect me.
I will praise God’s name in song
and glorify him with thanksgiving.
This will please the Lord more than an ox,
more than a bull with its horns and hooves.
The poor will see and be glad—
you who seek God, may your hearts live!
The Lord hears the needy
and does not despise his captive people.
Let heaven and earth praise him,
the seas and all that move in them,
for God will save Zion
and rebuild the cities of Judah.
Then people will settle there and possess it;
the children of his servants will inherit it,
and those who love his name will dwell there.” (Psalm 69:29-36)

Romans 3

Paul continues his argument- what advantage is there in being a Jew, if “circumcision” does not bring any benefits in and of itself. Paul tells us there is an advantage to bein a Jew- one of God’s covenant people- because the Jews received the Law and the “very wordsof God” from God. And then what about the unfaithfulness of the Jews- does that negate God’s faithfulness and righteousness? Absolutely not!:

“What advantage, then, is there in being a Jew, or what value is there in circumcision? Much in every way! First of all, the Jews have been entrusted with the very words of God. What if some were unfaithful? Will their unfaithfulness nullify

God's faithfulness? Not at all! Let God be true, and every human being a liar. As it is written:
"So that you may be proved right when you speak
*and prevail when you judge."(*Romans 3:1-4 quoting Psalm 51:4)

So, then, who is righteous? If the very people God entered into covenant with are not faithful to God, who has any realistic chance of satisfying God's Law and demands of righteousness- "right living"? The answer is clear- no one!:
"But if our unrighteousness brings out God's righteousness more clearly, what shall we say? That God is unjust in bringing his wrath on us? (I am using a human argument.) Certainly not! If that were so, how could God judge the world? Someone might argue, "If my falsehood enhances God's truthfulness and so increases his glory, why am I still condemned as a sinner?" Why not say—as some slanderously claim that we say—"Let us do evil that good may result"? Their condemnation is just! What shall we conclude then? Do we have any advantage? Not at all! For we have already made the charge that Jews and Gentiles alike are all under the power of sin. As it is written:

"There is no one righteous, not even one;
there is no one who understands;
there is no one who seeks God.
All have turned away,
they have together become worthless;
there is no one who does good,
not even one." (Romans 3:5-12 quoting Psalms 14:1-3; 53:1-3; Eccles. 7:20)

Then Paul teaches an important truth- the Law was given not so we could "follow it perfectly" and therefore become righteous, but was given as a diagnostic tool to show us our deep seated and pervasive sin nature: *"Now we know that whatever the law says, it says to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be silenced and the whole world held accountable to God. Therefore no one will be declared righteous in God's sight by the works of the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of our sin."* (Romans 3:19-20)

Finally, Paul points us to another righteousness which is "apart from the law". Just as when Abram believed God and his faith was "credited to him as righteousness" (Gen 15:6), so the faith in God's own Son Jesus justifies and saves us: *"But now apart from the law the righteousness of God has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify. This righteousness is given through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference between Jew and Gentile, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and all are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. God presented Christ as a sacrifice of atonement, through the shedding of his blood—to be received by faith. He did this to demonstrate his righteousness, because in his forbearance he had left the sins committed beforehand unpunished— he did it to demonstrate his righteousness at the present time, so as to be just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus."* (Romans 3:21-26) So now we see it- faith in Jesus and

belief that God gave us redemption through the shedding of His blood- are the pathways to righteousness.

There is, then, no room for pride and boating in our "own righteousness"- that door has closed forever. We have been given the Law, which then leads us to faith (requires faith!)- and this faith is the key to all righteousness: *"Where, then, is boasting? It is excluded. Because of what law? The law that requires works? No, because of the law that requires faith. For we maintain that a person is justified by faith apart from the works of the law. Or is God the God of Jews only? Is he not the God of Gentiles too? Yes, of Gentiles too, since there is only one God, who will justify the circumcised by faith and the uncircumcised through that same faith. Do we, then, nullify the law by this faith? Not at all! Rather, we uphold the law."* (Romans 3:27-31). The Law "requires faith" because that faith is our only realistic pathway to God's salvation in Jesus! Our other option is to obey the Law perfectly at all times- only One has ever done so. His blood then was not needed for His own sacrifice- He was without sin- he could offer the blood of His sacrifice to us!

Psalm 70-72 August 3, 2014 Romans 4

Save me- even though I am "poor and needy"- David pleads to God as he flees from the constant danger he faces. His words are touching and personal:

"Hasten, O God, to save me;
come quickly, Lord, to help me.
May those who want to take my life
be put to shame and confusion;
may all who desire my ruin
be turned back in disgrace.
May those who say to me, "Aha! Aha!"
turn back because of their shame." (Psalm 70:1-3)

David closes the psalm/song/plea with these words:

“But as for me, I am poor and needy;
come quickly to me, O God.
You are my help and my deliverer;
Lord, do not delay.” (Psalm 70:5)
We are always in need of God, but when we are in trouble, pain, or grief our need is sometimes achingly clear, and we cry out as children might “Help me”- and we mean we need help now!

The Psalmist has literally spent a lifetime learning about, loving and trusting God. He now recites his experience:
“For you have been my hope, Sovereign Lord,
my confidence since my youth.
From birth I have relied on you;
you brought me forth from my mother’s womb.
I will ever praise you.
I have become a sign to many;
you are my strong refuge.
My mouth is filled with your praise,
declaring your splendor all day long.” (Psalm 71:5-8)

And now the psalmist is older, beset by enemies and facing declining physical strength (Psalm 71:9), and asks God to again help and deliver and restore him:
“Your righteousness, God, reaches to the heavens,
you who have done great things.
Who is like you, God?
Though you have made me see troubles,
many and bitter,
you will restore my life again;
from the depths of the earth
you will again bring me up.
You will increase my honor
and comfort me once more.” (Psalm 71:19-21)

The Psalmist now claims victory over aging and enemies- he looks forward in faith at the song of victory, praise and triumpg that he will sing about his wonderful God:
“I will praise you with the harp
for your faithfulness, my God;
I will sing praise to you with the lyre,
Holy One of Israel.
My lips will shout for joy
when I sing praise to you—
I whom you have delivered.
My tongue will tell of your righteous acts
all day long,
for those who wanted to harm me
have been put to shame and confusion.” (Psalm 71:22-24)

Psalm 72 is attributed in the “marginal notes” to Solomon. The entire Psalm speaks of the king in the third person, although this seems on balance to be a “personal” plea to God for wisdom, courage and deliverance from the enemies of the King. There are references to the King seeking righteousness and just dealings with the people:

“Endow the king with your justice, O God,
the royal son with your righteousness.
May he judge your people in righteousness,
your afflicted ones with justice.” (Psalm 72:1-2)

Solomon asked God for wisdom and the ability to effectively rule and judge his people, which God had entrusted to him. We see this in 1 Kings 3: *“Now, Lord my God, you have made your servant king in place of my father David. But I am only a little child and do not know how to carry out my duties. Your servant is here among the people you have chosen, a great people, too numerous to count or number. So give your servant a discerning heart to govern your people and to distinguish between right and wrong. For who is able to govern this great people of yours?”* (1 Kings 3:7-9)

There is a reference to “Sheba” in this Psalm, perhaps an oblique reference to the vsit of the Queen of Sheba to Solomon:

“Long may he live!
May gold from Sheba be given him.
May people ever pray for him
and bless him all day long.
May grain abound throughout the land;
on the tops of the hills may it sway.
May the crops flourish like Lebanon
and thrive[d] like the grass of the field.” (Psalm 72:15-16)

The gift of gold is referred to in 1 Kings 10: *“And she gave the king 120 talents[b] of gold, large quantities of spices, and precious stones. Never again were so many spices brought in as those the queen of Sheba gave to King Solomon.”* (1 Kings 10:10)

The Psalmist then asks God to give the King long life and a successful reign:

“May his name endure forever;
may it continue as long as the sun.
Then all nations will be blessed through him,
and they will call him blessed.” (Psalm 72:17)

God had promised that the throne of David would be a permanent one, and would bring blessing to “all people”. The fulfilment of this King in the line of David was ultimately Jesus, who will “reign forever”- His name will endure! (2 Sam 7:17; Psalm 89:4)

However glorious the King is, the Psalmist reminds us that it is God who acts decisively and effectively in the lives of all men, and that he alone is the true King:

“Praise be to the Lord God, the God of Israel,
who alone does marvelous deeds.

Praise be to his glorious name forever;
may the whole earth be filled with his glory.
Amen and Amen." (Psalm 72:18-19)

Romans 4

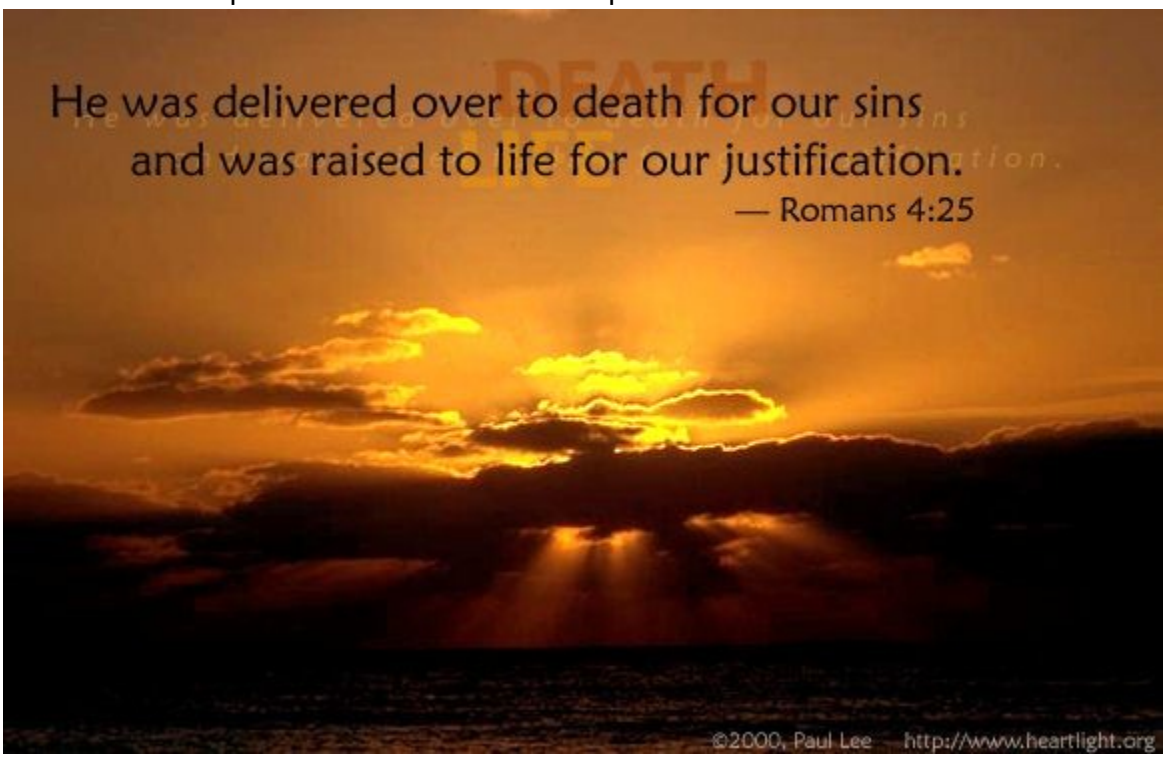
Paul then reviews one of the great themes os Scripture- that rightouesness by fauth of Abram as described in Genesis 15:6. Paul makes the point that this righteousness through faith occurred in Abram before his circumcision, thus establishing the fact that the Gentiles (who were typically uncircumcised) were not rejected in any way by God: *"What then shall we say that Abraham, our forefather according to the flesh, discovered in this matter? If, in fact, Abraham was justified by works, he had something to boast about—but not before God. What does Scripture say? "Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness."*
Now to the one who works, wages are not credited as a gift but as an obligation. However, to the one who does not work but trusts God who justifies the ungodly, their faith is credited as righteousness. David says the same thing when he speaks of the blessedness of the one to whom God credits righteousness apart from works:
"Blessed are those
whose transgressions are forgiven,
whose sins are covered.
Blessed is the one
whose sin the Lord will never count against them."
Is this blessedness only for the circumcised, or also for the uncircumcised? We have been saying that Abraham's faith was credited to him as righteousness. Under what circumstances was it credited? Was it after he was circumcised, or before? It was not after, but before!" (Romans 4:1-10 quoting Psalm 32:1-2))

So Paul's very logical argument is that since Abram was uncircumcised, and he was "credited" with righteousness- then salvation comes through faith and is not dependent on the "state" or identity of the believer. The example from the Psalms is also very compelling- God forgives transgressions and sins "apart from works" (verse 6)

Circumcision, over which many "church fights" were fought, is seen here as a "sign and a seal" of the covenant that God has already made with bram base on Abram's faith: *"And he received circumcision as a sign, a seal of the righteousness that he had by faith while he was still uncircumcised. So then, he is the father of all who believe but have not been circumcised, in order that righteousness might be credited to them. And he is then also the father of the circumcised who not only are circumcised but who also follow in the footsteps of the faith that our father Abraham had before he was circumcised. It was not through the law that Abraham and his offspring received the promise that he would be heir of the world, but through the righteousness that comes by faith. For if those who depend on the law are heirs, faith means nothing and the promise is worthless, because the law brings wrath. And where there is no law there is no transgression. Therefore, the promise comes by faith, so that it may be by grace and may be guaranteed to all Abraham's*

offspring—not only to those who are of the law but also to those who have the faith of Abraham." (Romans 4: 11-16) So then, the promise is "by faith" (verse 16)!

Paul then makes a very important point- this "righteousness" that was credited to Abram by faith is also credited to all of us the same way- theough faith! We also have faith in God's promises, sometimes "against all hope" (verse 18) and we are rewarded, as Abram was, with great and unexpected blessings. Abram received a child- a child who would be the bearer of the promise of God's covenant. We also receive wonderful and unexpected gifts from God as well:
"Against all hope, Abraham in hope believed and so became the father of many nations, just as it had been said to him, "So shall your offspring be." Without weakening in his faith, he faced the fact that his body was as good as dead—since he was about a hundred years old—and that Sarah's womb was also dead. Yet he did not waver through unbelief regarding the promise of God, but was strengthened in his faith and gave glory to God, being fully persuaded that God had power to do what he had promised. This is why "it was credited to him as righteousness." The words "it was credited to him" were written not for him alone, but also for us, to whom God will credit righteousness—for us who believe in him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead. He was delivered over to death for our sins and was raised to life for our justification." (Romans 4:18-25) Because of the death and resurrection of Jesus, we too can- and do- believe and are "fully persuaded" that God has the power to do "what he promised"! His Name be praised!



http://www.heartlight.org/gallery/romans4_25.html

Psalm 73-74 August 4, 2014 Romans 5

Why do those that are evil prosper, while the godly suffer? This problem has plagued the faithful from the beginning of civilization. The Psalmist pleads with God to see and correct this inequity, and to restore the righteous:

"Surely God is good to Israel,
to those who are pure in heart.
But as for me, my feet had almost slipped;
I had nearly lost my foothold.
For I envied the arrogant
when I saw the prosperity of the wicked.
They have no struggles;
their bodies are healthy and strong.[a]
They are free from common human burdens;
they are not plagued by human ills.
Therefore pride is their necklace;
they clothe themselves with violence.
From their callous hearts comes iniquity[b];
their evil imaginations have no limits.
They scoff, and speak with malice;
with arrogance they threaten oppression.
Their mouths lay claim to heaven,
and their tongues take possession of the earth.
Therefore their people turn to them
and drink up waters in abundance.[c]
They say, "How would God know?
Does the Most High know anything?" (Psalm 73:1-11)

However incredible their arrogance seems to be, they are- for the short term- succeeding in disregarding and even mocking God and the righteous. The key is that this only works for a while- inevitabley God will judge and restore moral order.

The psalmist comforts himself with the promise of God's restoration and final judgment on the wicked, and delights in his close relationship with God:

"Yet I am always with you;
you hold me by my right hand.
You guide me with your counsel,
and afterward you will take me into glory.
Whom have I in heaven but you?
And earth has nothing I desire besides you.
My flesh and my heart may fail,
but God is the strength of my heart
and my portion forever.
Those who are far from you will perish;
you destroy all who are unfaithful to you.
But as for me, it is good to be near God.
I have made the Sovereign Lord my refuge;
I will tell of all your deeds." (Psalm 73:23-28)

God is his “portion forever”, and the sovereign God is the psalmists (and our) refuge forever.

Israel, both now and historically, has been completely surrounded with enemies. When these enemies triumph in a military sense, the suffering and despair of God’s people is deep and very dark. The psalmist cries out to God for relief from the oppression of these enemies:

“O God, why have you rejected us forever?
Why does your anger smolder against the sheep of your pasture?
Remember the nation you purchased long ago,
the people of your inheritance, whom you redeemed—
Mount Zion, where you dwelt.
Turn your steps toward these everlasting ruins,
all this destruction the enemy has brought on the sanctuary.
Your foes roared in the place where you met with us;
they set up their standards as signs.
They behaved like men wielding axes
to cut through a thicket of trees.
They smashed all the carved paneling
with their axes and hatchets.
They burned your sanctuary to the ground;
they defiled the dwelling place of your Name.
They said in their hearts, “We will crush them completely!”
They burned every place where God was worshiped in the land.” (Psalm 74:1-8)

And the situation is especially bleak in that God has apparently “forgotten” His people- He has not sent messengers- angels or prophets- to speak God’s Word to the people:

“We are given no signs from God;
no prophets are left,
and none of us knows how long this will be.
How long will the enemy mock you, God?
Will the foe revile your name forever?
Why do you hold back your hand, your right hand?
Take it from the folds of your garment and destroy them!” (Psalm 74:9-11)

The psalmist then remembers who the God of the universe is- it is he that created everything and set it into motion, and it is God who will ultimately restore His people:

“But God is my King from long ago;
he brings salvation on the earth.
It was you who split open the sea by your power;
you broke the heads of the monster in the waters.
It was you who crushed the heads of Leviathan
and gave it as food to the creatures of the desert.
It was you who opened up springs and streams;
you dried up the ever-flowing rivers.

The day is yours, and yours also the night;
you established the sun and moon.
It was you who set all the boundaries of the earth;
you made both summer and winter." (Psalm 74:12-17)

God is urgently needed- it is late in the day, and the suffering and oppression of the people is real and soul-destroying. The psalmist pleads with God to set things right, and to do it soon:

"Rise up, O God, and defend your cause;
remember how fools mock you all day long.
Do not ignore the clamor of your adversaries,
the uproar of your enemies, which rises continually." (Psalm 74:22-23)

Romans 5

We were helpless, unsaved and enemies of God. Then He sent His Son, who willingly laid down His life so that we might be reconciled to Him. We were powerless to do this great act for ourselves, so God in His grace and mercy did it for us. We are ever in His debt for this amazing "lifesaving" act:

"Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand. And we boast in the hope of the glory of God. Not only so, but we also glory in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. And hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us. You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous person, though for a good person someone might possibly dare to die. But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us." (Romans 5:1-8)

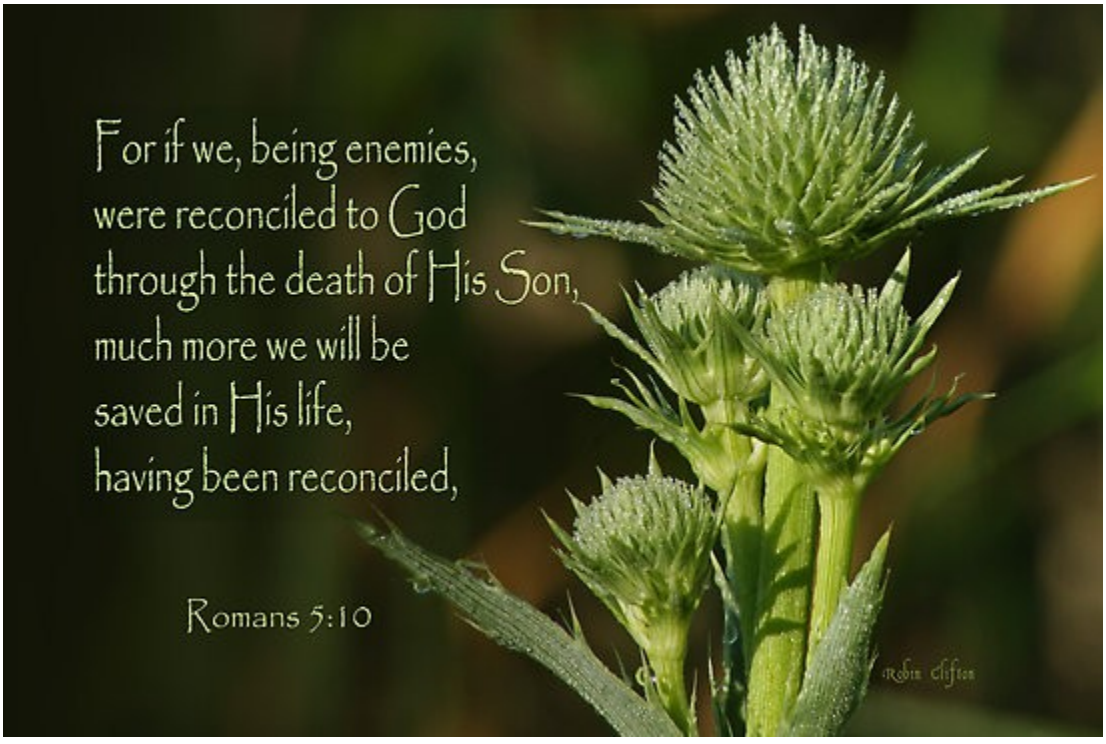
One of the greatest benefits of our salvation is peace- real peace- with God. Our sufferings are no longer pointless and empty- they are allowed to enter our lives to build perseverance, character and hope. This is, of course, sometimes hard to remember when we are in the midst of suffering. Sometimes our friends, church and family need to "remember this truth" for us!

Paul then outlines a very profound account of the theology of Jesus as the "Second Adam". Just as sin came into the world with one man- Adam- salvation came through another- Jesus:

"Therefore, just as sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin, and in this way death came to all people, because all sinned— To be sure, sin was in the world before the law was given, but sin is not charged against anyone's account

where there is no law. Nevertheless, death reigned from the time of Adam to the time of Moses, even over those who did not sin by breaking a command, as did Adam, who is a pattern of the one to come. But the gift is not like the trespass. For if the many died by the trespass of the one man, how much more did God's grace and the gift that came by the grace of the one man, Jesus Christ, overflow to the many! Nor can the gift of God be compared with the result of one man's sin: The judgment followed one sin and brought condemnation, but the gift followed many trespasses and brought justification. For if, by the trespass of the one man, death reigned through that one man, how much more will those who receive God's abundant provision of grace and of the gift of righteousness reign in life through the one man, Jesus Christ! Consequently, just as one trespass resulted in condemnation for all people, so also one righteous act resulted in justification and life for all people. For just as through the disobedience of the one man the many were made sinners, so also through the obedience of the one man the many will be made righteous." (Romans 5:12-19)

So, then, the Law was supplemented by grace! Whereas the Law showed us hos "sick we were" and how profound and pervasive our sin nature was, the grace of God was given so that true righteousness and victory over sin might be possible: *"The law was brought in so that the trespass might increase. But where sin increased, grace increased all the more, so that, just as sin reigned in death, so also grace might reign through righteousness to bring eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord."* (Romans 5:20-21)



Reconciled and Saved ~ Romans 5:10by Robin Clifton

Psalm 75-77 August 5, 2014 Romans 6

The world says- the spoils go to the victor, might makes right, and take are of number one (yourself). God's people say differently. They have experienced the grace and mercy of God, and remember that God triumphs in the end and is in control. The psalmist describes it this way:

"We praise you, God,
we praise you, for your Name is near;
people tell of your wonderful deeds.
You say, "I choose the appointed time;
it is I who judge with equity.
When the earth and all its people quake,
it is I who hold its pillars firm.
To the arrogant I say, 'Boast no more,'
and to the wicked, 'Do not lift up your horns.
Do not lift your horns against heaven;
do not speak so defiantly."' (Psalm 75:1-5)

So what are these "horns"? They are symbols of strength- the wicked think they have all the power and control, and they are defiant toward God. They are mistaken and in trouble for their very sould. The psalmist describes how God will handle these who defy Him:

"No one from the east or the west
or from the desert can exalt themselves.
It is God who judges:
He brings one down, he exalts another.
In the hand of the Lord is a cup
full of foaming wine mixed with spices;
he pours it out, and all the wicked of the earth
drink it down to its very dregs." (Psalm 75:6-8)

The result- the righteous will be lifted up, and the wicked cut off:

"As for me, I will declare this forever;
I will sing praise to the God of Jacob,
who says, "I will cut off the horns of all the wicked,
but the horns of the righteous will be lifted up." (Psalm 75:9-10)

Psalm 76 is a poetic tribute to the might and power of the Sovereign God. His Name is renowned- He has shown His might in battle:

"God is renowned in Judah;
in Israel his name is great.
His tent is in Salem,
his dwelling place in Zion.
There he broke the flashing arrows,
the shields and the swords, the weapons of war." (Psalm 76:1-3)

God pronounces judgment, no force on earth can stand against Him:

"It is you alone who are to be feared.
Who can stand before you when you are angry?
From heaven you pronounced judgment,
and the land feared and was quiet—

when you, God, rose up to judge,
to save all the afflicted of the land.
Surely your wrath against mankind brings you praise,
and the survivors of your wrath are restrained." (Psalm 76:7-10)

God is rightfully feared across the earth- we should bring tributes to Him:

"Make vows to the LORD your God and fulfill them;
let all the neighboring lands
bring gifts to the One to be feared.
He breaks the spirit of rulers;
he is feared by the kings of the earth." (Psalm 76:11-12)

So why then do God's people live in fear and dread of their enemies? Do we not have enough faith to believe in His ultimate triumph? Are the lessons taught in revelation not enough to give us rest at night? We have the best retirement system in the world- heaven forever with te Lrd- my prayer is that we should claim this promise and live like victorious people!

Sometimes een the most devoted and Spirit filled are despondent and discouraged. The realities of evil, the constant battle against enemies- both personal and spiritual, can cause even the most dvoted and faithful belever to feel downcast and abandoned. The psalmist- identified here as Asaph- cries out to God for healp and shelter:

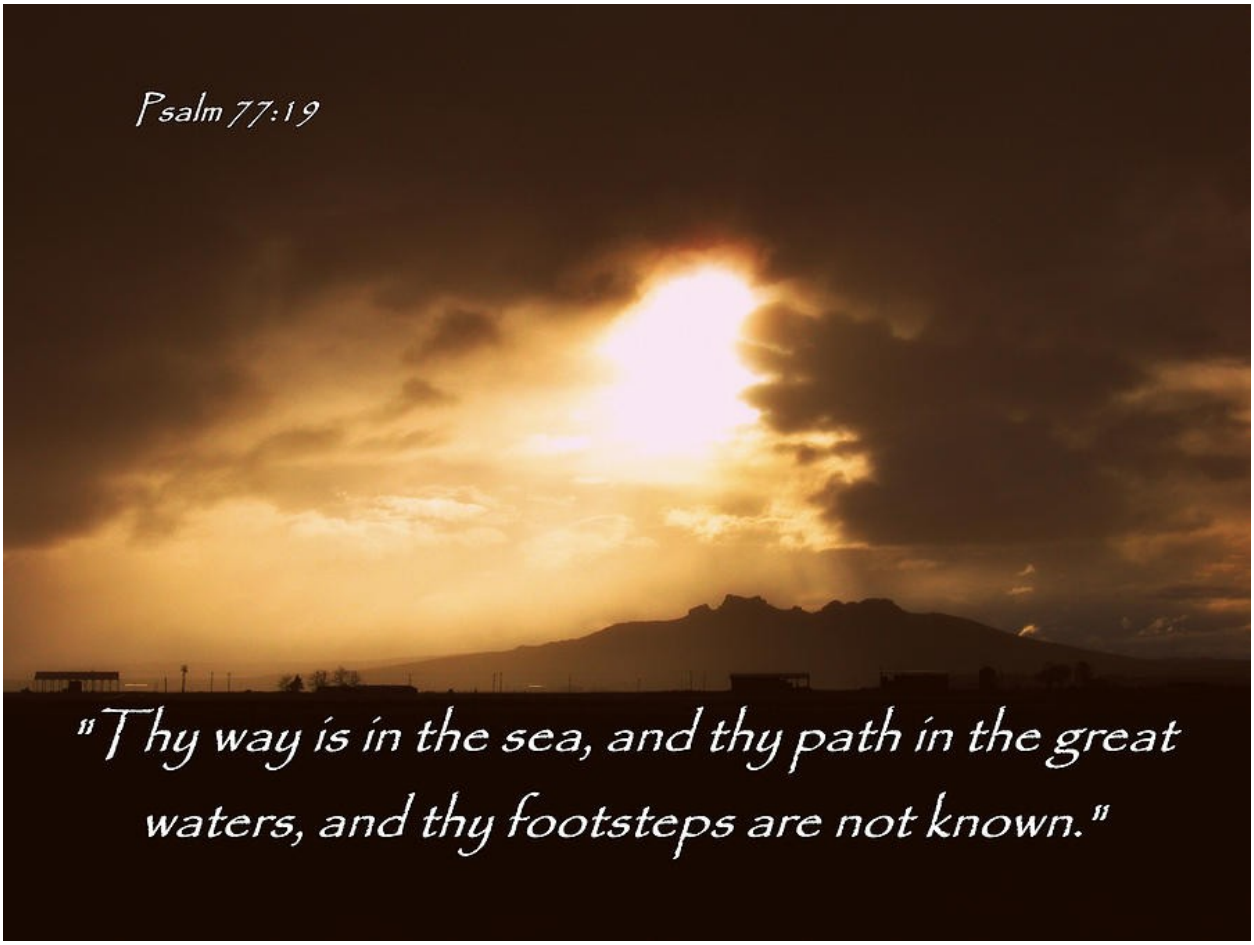
"I cried out to God for help;
I cried out to God to hear me.
When I was in distress, I sought the Lord;
at night I stretched out untiring hands,
and I would not be comforted.
I remembered you, God, and I groaned;
I meditated, and my spirit grew faint.
You kept my eyes from closing;
I was too troubled to speak.
I thought about the former days,
the years of long ago;
I remembered my songs in the night.
My heart meditated and my spirit asked:
"Will the Lord reject forever?
Will he never show his favor again?
Has his unfailing love vanished forever?
Has his promise failed for all time?
Has God forgotten to be merciful?
Has he in anger withheld his compassion?" (Psalm 77:1-9)

The psalmist remembers the times God was real and near, and this makes his isolation and pain even worse by comparison. Then the solution occurs to the psalmist- he will meditate on those times God has acted, and on the wonderful character and attributes of his God. When we are in a similar situation and "don't feel like raying", we can change our attitude by first meditating on the wonderful nature of our God, remember His blessings and faithfulness, and then we will inevitable feel better:

“Then I thought, “To this I will appeal:
the years when the Most High stretched out his right hand.
I will remember the deeds of the Lord;
yes, I will remember your miracles of long ago.
I will consider all your works
and meditate on all your mighty deeds.”
Your ways, God, are holy.
What god is as great as our God?
You are the God who performs miracles;
you display your power among the peoples.
With your mighty arm you redeemed your people,
the descendants of Jacob and Joseph.” (Psalm 77 10-15)

The conclusion? God is reliable and just, God is our strength and refuge- even when we don’t “feel it”. God has acted mightily on behalf of His people, an will do so again:

“Your path led through the sea,
your way through the mighty waters,
though your footprints were not seen.
You led your people like a flock
by the hand of Moses and Aaron.” (Psalm 77:19-20)



His Footstep- Psalm 77 by Cindy Wright

Romans 6

Paul describes for us the events that occur when we are baptized into Christ: we die with Him, and then are raised with Him also. This has been the subject f some controversy in the Christian church, since baptism is interpreted very differently in the different traditions of the church. The Roman catholic/Anglican/Wesleyan practice of infant baptism is rejected by other Christian traditions, since the infant is not "submerged". The center of this controversy is the Greek word "baptizo", which has the definition: "to dip repeatedly, to immerse, to submerge (of vessels sunk); to cleanse by dipping or submerging, to wash, to make clean with water, to wash one's self, bathe; to overwhelm"
http://www.biblestudytools.com/lexicons/greek/nas/baptizo.html

Verses 3-5 of Romans 6 describe the baptism of the believer this way: *"Or don't you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life. For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly also be united with him in a resurrection like his."* (Romans 6:3-5) When we are

immersed in the water (or “dunked” as we say in the South) then we are symbolically “buried” with Him and are baptized “into death” after which we are “raised up” or resurrected like Him also. I became so convinced of the truth of this practice of immersion that I had my son Benjamin “re-baptize” me some years ago by immersion. It wasn’t that I doubted God’s grace at my original baptism in March 1948, but it was out of a need for obedience that I submitted to immersion.

The Paul asks an interesting question- shouldn’t we sin more, so that God’s grace would increase? The fallacy of this argument is that we are “playing a game” with God and trivializing both sin and forgiveness. When we persist in sinning we are allowing ourselves to be enslaved by sin- after all, we can’t serve “two masters” (Matthew 6:24; Luke 16:13) Paul insists that we become “slaves to righteousness”, that is, so committed to God’s rule in our lives that we follow His directions as “commands” and don’t even seriously consider disobedience as an option!
”What then? Shall we sin because we are not under the law but under grace? By no means! Don’t you know that when you offer yourselves to someone as obedient slaves, you are slaves of the one you obey—whether you are slaves to sin, which leads to death, or to obedience, which leads to righteousness? But thanks be to God that, though you used to be slaves to sin, you have come to obey from your heart the pattern of teaching that has now claimed your allegiance. You have been set free from sin and have become slaves to righteousness.” (Romans 6:15-18)

The Paul carefully explains the difference in slavery to sin and slavery to righteousness- to the Lord Himself. The difference is seen not only in the practice of one’s life but the wages that are received: *“I am using an example from everyday life because of your human limitations. Just as you used to offer yourselves as slaves to impurity and to ever-increasing wickedness, so now offer yourselves as slaves to righteousness leading to holiness. When you were slaves to sin, you were free from the control of righteousness. What benefit did you reap at that time from the things you are now ashamed of? Those things result in death! But now that you have been set free from sin and have become slaves of God, the benefit you reap leads to holiness, and the result is eternal life. For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.”* (Romans 6:19-23) The differences could not be more dramatic- 1) choose sin- chose death; 2) chose God’s gift- inherit eternal life with Him! We must choose, and choose each day who we are to serve. Serve God and live- and live abundantly!

Psalm 78 August 6, 2014 Romans 7

Psalm 78 is a long tribute to the powr and sovereignty of God, and the lasting power of His law and covenant with His people. When the people acknowledged, worshipped and were obedient to God, they prospered, when they forgot God they failed and were oppressed by their many enemies:
“My people, hear my teaching;
listen to the words of my mouth.
I will open my mouth with a parable;
I will utter hidden things, things from of old—
things we have heard and known,
things our ancestors have told us.

We will not hide them from their descendants;
we will tell the next generation
the praiseworthy deeds of the Lord,
his power, and the wonders he has done.
He decreed statutes for Jacob
and established the law in Israel,
which he commanded our ancestors
to teach their children,
so the next generation would know them,
even the children yet to be born,
and they in turn would tell their children.
Then they would put their trust in God
and would not forget his deeds
but would keep his commands.
They would not be like their ancestors—
a stubborn and rebellious generation,
whose hearts were not loyal to God,
whose spirits were not faithful to him." (Psalm 78:1-8)

When those who called themselves God's people followed Him only, they were peopsperous, peaceful and enjoyed the land of Promise and Plenty that God had provided. So ofrten., though, they abandoned God and His decrees, laws and commands and suffered greatly for it:

"The men of Ephraim, though armed with bows,
turned back on the day of battle;
they did not keep God's covenant
and refused to live by his law.
They forgot what he had done,
the wonders he had shown them." (Psalm 78:9-11)

They not only forgot about God, they actively rebelled against Him, greatly to their peril:

"But they continued to sin against him,
rebelling in the wilderness against the Most High.
They willfully put God to the test
by demanding the food they craved.
They spoke against God;
they said, "Can God really
spread a table in the wilderness?
True, he struck the rock,
and water gushed out,
streams flowed abundantly,
but can he also give us bread?
Can he supply meat for his people?"
When the Lord heard them, he was furious;
his fire broke out against Jacob,
and his wrath rose against Israel,
for they did not believe in God

or trust in his deliverance." (Psalm 78:17-22).

They deserved, and received, God's wrath upon them for their stubborn rebelliousness. Even though God acted in a mighty way to release them from salvery in Egypt, they constantly complained and bitterly cried out to God in the wilderness years:

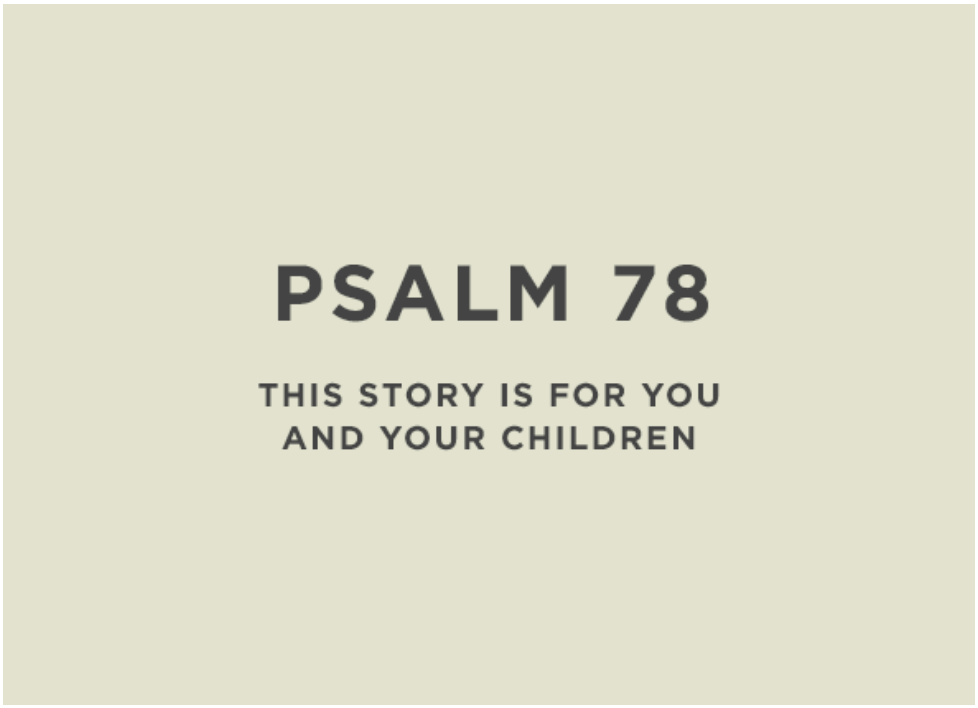
"How often they rebelled against him in the wilderness
and grieved him in the wasteland!
Again and again they put God to the test;
they vexed the Holy One of Israel.
They did not remember his power—
the day he redeemed them from the oppressor,
the day he displayed his signs in Egypt,
his wonders in the region of Zoan." (Psalm 78:40-43)

The people not only complained to God and forgot Hid mighty acts of deliverance, but they turned to high places, idols and falso gods once they were settled in the Land (and memorable, with a Golden Calf, while they were in transit):

"But they put God to the test
and rebelled against the Most High;
they did not keep his statutes.
Like their ancestors they were disloyal and faithless,
as unreliable as a faulty bow.
They angered him with their high places;
they aroused his jealousy with their idols." (Psalm 78:56-8)

Then, at last, God "woke up". This was the perception of the psalmist- He had been awake the whole time…it was actually they who "woke up" to His presence among them. God then set things right- favoring the obedient Judah over the disobedient Israel, and placing his servant David in leadership as king:

"Then the Lord awoke as from sleep,
as a warrior wakes from the stupor of wine.
He beat back his enemies;
he put them to everlasting shame.
Then he rejected the tents of Joseph,
he did not choose the tribe of Ephraim;
but he chose the tribe of Judah,
Mount Zion, which he loved.
He built his sanctuary like the heights,
like the earth that he established forever.
He chose David his servant
and took him from the sheep pens;
from tending the sheep he brought him
to be the shepherd of his people Jacob,
of Israel his inheritance.
And David shepherded them with integrity of heart;
with skillful hands he led them." (Psalm 78:65-72)



http://wbc.org/th_gallery/05-12-2013-psalm-78/

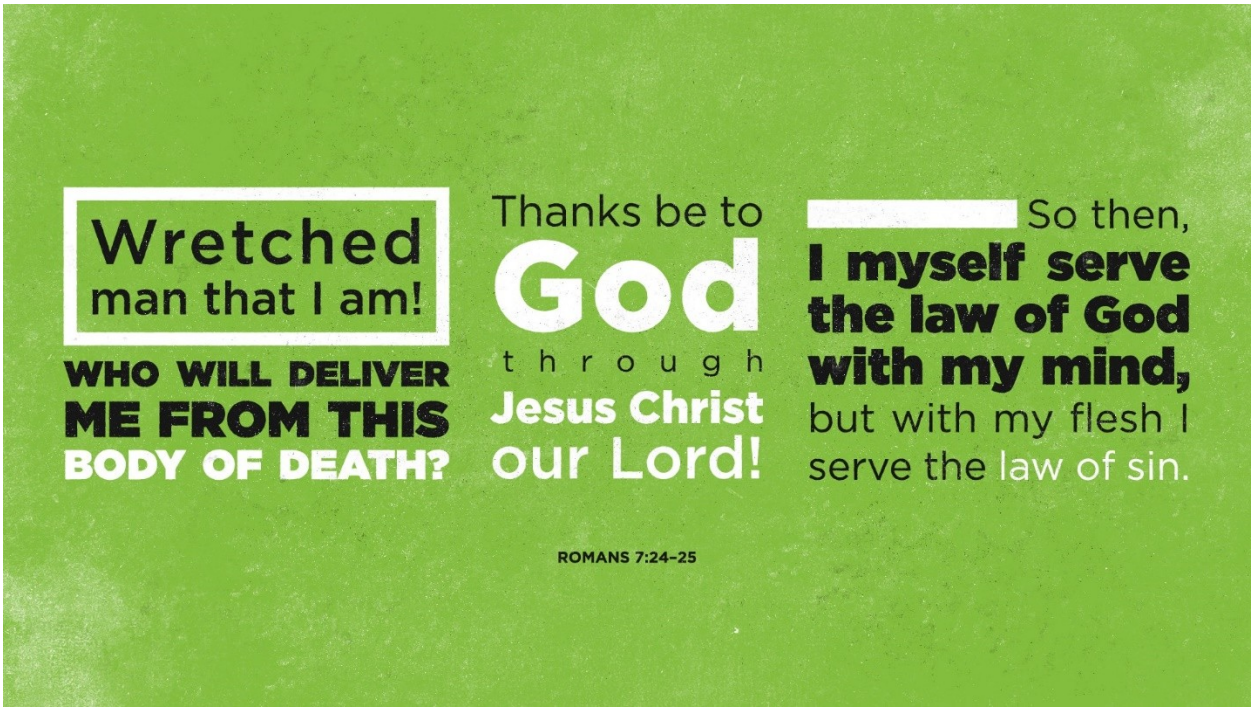
Romans 7

Paul explains the freedom we have in Christ, using the analogy of marriage. A woman is free to marry again if the one she was married to dies. So just as the woman is freed from the "old covenant" – in this case, of marriage- we are released from the covenant of the Law into freedom in Christ: "*So, my brothers and sisters, you also died to the law through the body of Christ, that you might belong to another, to him who was raised from the dead, in order that we might bear fruit for God. For when we were in the realm of the flesh, the sinful passions aroused by the law were at work in us, so that we bore fruit for death. But now, by dying to what once bound us, we have been released from the law so that we serve in the new way of the Spirit, and not in the old way of the written code."* (Romans 7:4-6) We literally "died to the Law" so that we could become possessed by Christ Himself! Now, by dying tho the "sinful passions aroused by the Law" we are released into new life, and are not condemned to "bear fruit for death". Instead, we "bear fruit for God" (verse 4)

Then Paul, in his very convoluted way, explains that even though the Law is not "sinful" itself (in fact is righteous and holy "*So then, the law is holy, and the commandment is holy, righteous and good"* Romans 7:12), it brings out the sin nature in us by "pointing out" or making us aware how we might sin. Without a commandement that I should not steal, I might happily ignore the possessions of others, but when I hear and understand the Law I am tempted to let my sin nature rule in me: *"What shall we say, then? Is the law sinful? Certainly not! Nevertheless, I would not have known what sin was had it not been for the law. For I would not have known what coveting really was if the law had not said, "You shall not covet." But sin, seizing the opportunity afforded by the commandment, produced in me every*

kind of coveting. For apart from the law, sin was dead. Once I was alive apart from the law; but when the commandment came, sin sprang to life and I died. I found that the very commandment that was intended to bring life actually brought death. For sin, seizing the opportunity afforded by the commandment, deceived me, and through the commandment put me to death." (Romans 7:7-11)

Paul then confesses his own "unspiritual" state, and asks an important question- How can I, a sinful person, ever be saved? It is certain I cannot save myself (So much for rugged individualism!). His answer is that only through God's grace does he – or anyone- have a chance at abundant, eternal life: *"We know that the law is spiritual; but I am unspiritual, sold as a slave to sin. I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do. And if I do what I do not want to do, I agree that the law is good. As it is, it is no longer I myself who do it, but it is sin living in me. For I know that good itself does not dwell in me, that is, in my sinful nature. For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out. For I do not do the good I want to do, but the evil I do not want to do—this I keep on doing. Now if I do what I do not want to do, it is no longer I who do it, but it is sin living in me that does it. So I find this law at work: Although I want to do good, evil is right there with me. For in my inner being I delight in God's law; but I see another law at work in me, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin at work within me. What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body that is subject to death? Thanks be to God, who delivers me through Jesus Christ our Lord!"* (Romans 7:14-25)



http://anthonysvajda.com/verse-for-today-romans-724-25-esv-bible-logos/

Psalm 79-81 August 6, 2014 Romans 8:1-18

Brutal, devastating and complete defeat- this was the experience of God's prople in so many instances when their sworn enemies defeated, conqured and subdues

them. Sometimes the more powerful nations sent the people into exile. In the time of Jesus, the Romans rules with an iron hand. How could God have allowed this? How could God still be in control?

The psalmist cries out to God in such a situation:

“O God, the nations have invaded your inheritance;
they have defiled your holy temple,
they have reduced Jerusalem to rubble.
They have left the dead bodies of your servants
as food for the birds of the sky,
the flesh of your own people for the animals of the wild.
They have poured out blood like water
all around Jerusalem,
and there is no one to bury the dead.
We are objects of contempt to our neighbors,
of scorn and derision to those around us.
How long, Lord? Will you be angry forever?
How long will your jealousy burn like fire?
Pour out your wrath on the nations
that do not acknowledge you,
on the kingdoms
that do not call on your name;
for they have devoured Jacob
and devastated his homeland.” (Psalm 79:1-7)

The psalmist then cries out for forgiveness and restoration. Surely God would not want His Name to be defiled and thought less of when His very prople were in tatters?

“Do not hold against us the sins of past generations;
may your mercy come quickly to meet us,
for we are in desperate need.
Help us, God our Savior,
for the glory of your name;
deliver us and forgive our sins
for your name’s sake.
Why should the nations say,
“Where is their God?”” (Psalm 79:8-10)

Where, indeed was the God of Israel who had delivered them from Egypt and done mighty deeds on their behalf? The psalmist cries out for revenge, for vengeance, and then the people will worship the true God. Did the psalmist really believe that he could “bribe” God? Neverhteless. He cries out in his human limitedness and asks for deliverance:

“Before our eyes, make known among the nations
that you avenge the outpoured blood of your servants.
May the groans of the prisoners come before you;

with your strong arm preserve those condemned to die.
Pay back into the laps of our neighbors seven times
the contempt they have hurled at you, Lord.
Then we your people, the sheep of your pasture,
will praise you forever;
from generation to generation
we will proclaim your praise." (Psalm 79:10-13)

Hear us, restore us, bring us back to the favor that you gave to us in the past! Thes were the cries of the people and the psalmist to their God:

"Hear us, Shepherd of Israel,
you who lead Joseph like a flock.
You who sit enthroned between the cherubim,
shine forth before Ephraim, Benjamin and Manasseh.
Awaken your might;
come and save us.
Restore us, O God;
make your face shine on us,
that we may be saved.
How long, Lord God Almighty,
will your anger smolder
against the prayers of your people?
You have fed them with the bread of tears;
you have made them drink tears by the bowlful.
You have made us an object of derision to our neighbors,
and our enemies mock us.
Restore us, God Almighty;
make your face shine on us,
that we may be saved." (Psalm 80:1-7)

The role of Gopd as Savior is seen clearly here. He will, does, did save and ultimately participated in the Incarnation of the Son to be the "final", oince and for all Savior of the world. Here we see the role of Savior through the monotheistic lens of the Hebrew faith- one God, in unity and indivisible!

The vineyards are destroyed, the walls broken down, and all is in ruins and disrepair. The psalmist then asks that the "son of man" be given to God's people, that he may appear and save them. He was to come thousands of years later, but the prophetic vision given to the psalmist was true but misunderstood. The psalmist simply could not accurately translate his prophetic vision into a "timetable". God, however, was patiently waiting for the right time- exactly the right time to save His people (Gal 4:4)

"Your vine is cut down, it is burned with fire;
at your rebuke your people perish.
Let your hand rest on the man at your right hand,
the son of man you have raised up for yourself.
Then we will not turn away from you;

revive us, and we will call on your name.
Restore us, Lord God Almighty;
make your face shine on us,
that we may be saved." (Psalm 80:16-19)

There is joy in Israel- God' people rejoice when they remember the deliverance granted to them from slavery and bondage in Egypt. They remember and rejoice:
"Sing for joy to God our strength;
shout aloud to the God of Jacob!
Begin the music, strike the timbrel,
play the melodious harp and lyre.
Sound the ram's horn at the New Moon,
and when the moon is full, on the day of our festival;
this is a decree for Israel,
an ordinance of the God of Jacob.
When God went out against Egypt,
he established it as a statute for Joseph." (Psalm 81:1-5)
God knows the fickle faithfulness of His people. They are obedient in response and gratitude for His mighty acts and deliuverance, and then they quickly forget and abadon His ways. They ask the age old question: "What have you done for me lately?" forgetting in their arrogance and self sufficiency how deep and intense their suffering was. This was suffering that was deserved since it was the logical conclusion to their arrogance and self righteousness. God wants to provide plentt and blessing, but His people constantly stray from Him:
"I am the Lord your God,
who brought you up out of Egypt.
Open wide your mouth and I will fill it.
"But my people would not listen to me;
Israel would not submit to me.
So I gave them over to their stubborn hearts
to follow their own devices.
"If my people would only listen to me,
if Israel would only follow my ways,
how quickly I would subdue their enemies
and turn my hand against their foes!
Those who hate the Lord would cringe before him,
and their punishment would last forever.
But you would be fed with the finest of wheat;
with honey from the rock I would satisfy you."(Psalm 81:10-16).
This is the lament we hear throughout the Hebrew Scriptures: "…if only my people would listen to Me" (verse 13)

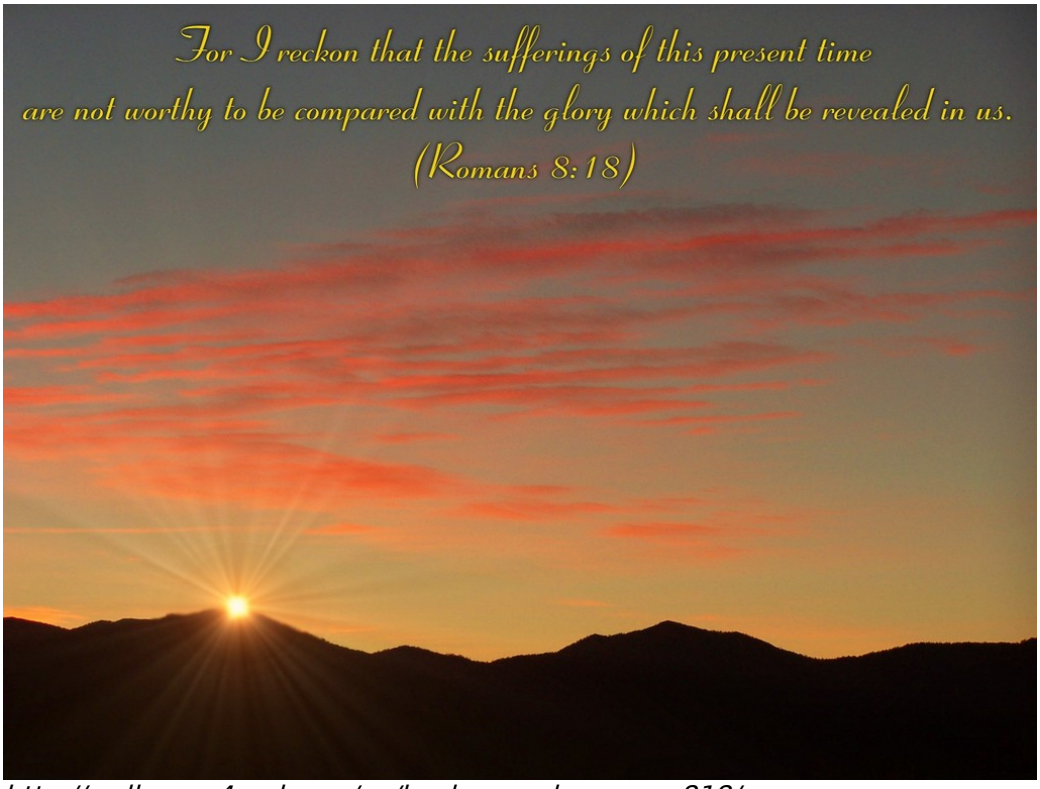
Romans 8:1-18

So let me get this straight….flesh is evil and spirit is good…right? But…I thought God created everything to be good..? How could that which God created be evil?

Paul had to deal with this question in depth, for the very theology he promoted and developed had to do with the sharp division between that which was marred, stained and spoiled with sin- and that which was pure, godly and righteous. The Pauline view of sin is that is was a profound "infection" of the original human image and spirit- an infection which entered by disobedience prompted by our desire to serve self instead of God. When Adam ate the "forbidden" fruit, he was exercising a choice that God had given him, but a chouice that God wished would be made to be obedient. The perfect harmony that once existed in the garden was forever broken- and like Humpty "couldn't be put together again"- at least by us.

God had to act decisively to repair the breach between Himself and His vcreaton, and He did so by the voluntary sacrifice of the Son: *"Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, because through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit who gives life has set you free from the law of sin and death. For what the law was powerless to do because it was weakened by the flesh, God did by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh to be a sin offering. And so he condemned sin in the flesh, in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fully met in us, who do not live according to the flesh but according to the Spirit. Those who live according to the flesh have their minds set on what the flesh desires; but those who live in accordance with the Spirit have their minds set on what the Spirit desires. The mind governed by the flesh is death, but the mind governed by the Spirit is life and peace. The mind governed by the flesh is hostile to God; it does not submit to God's law, nor can it do so. Those who are in the realm of the flesh cannot please God."* (Romans 8:1-8)

The cycle of sin and death was now broken- there was a way out provided by God to us so that we caould then no longer "live according to the flesh" but the Spirit of God Himself! We deserved punishment, we received mercy. We deserved to die in our sins- He saved us not only from the consequences of sin but the power of sin. We have literally been transformed- made over and anew- by the saving work of the Spirit! If Christ is alive in us, then we can truly live: "*But if Christ is in you, then even though your body is subject to death because of sin, the Spirit gives life because of righteousness. And if the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead is living in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies because of his Spirit who lives in you. Therefore, brothers and sisters, we have an obligation—but it is not to the flesh, to live according to it. For if you live according to the flesh, you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the misdeeds of the body, you will live*." (Romans 8:10-13).
And there is wonderful news- there is glory ahead of us, literally waiting for us- the glory of the Father Himself: *"The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children. Now if we are children, then we are heirs—heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory. I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us."* (Romans 8:16-18) We may suffer for a while, but the suffering is transient and we have been given an eternal membership in the royal family- we are truly children of the King!



http://wallpaper4god.com/en/background_romans-818/

Psalm 82-84 August 8, 2014 Romans 8:19-39

The difference bwetween the "gods" and God is more than the difference in a capital letter "G". Psalm 82 explores the difference between those who would act as "god" and the true God of the universe. The psalmist shows God's attitude toward these "gods":

"God presides in the great assembly;
he renders judgment among the "gods":
"How long will you[a] defend the unjust
and show partiality to the wicked?
Defend the weak and the fatherless;
uphold the cause of the poor and the oppressed.
Rescue the weak and the needy;
deliver them from the hand of the wicked.
"The 'gods' know nothing, they understand nothing.
They walk about in darkness;
all the foundations of the earth are shaken." (Psalm 82:1-5)

God challenges these "gods" who "walk in darkness" to do what he does- defend the weak, uphold the cause of the poor and oppressed- but they cannot. He then goes on to state the two factors that "prove" that they are not truly in charge of the world- or even their own lives: 1) they will die; and 2) their power is limited, and they will fail. The psalimist then ends by praising the One true God:

"I said, 'You are "gods";
you are all sons of the Most High.'
But you will die like mere mortals;
you will fall like every other ruler."
Rise up, O God, judge the earth,

for all the nations are your inheritance." (Psalm 82:6-8)

The enemies of God's people are gathering again…and the psalmist once again cries out to God for help and protection. It was important that God save them, so that the honor of His name- associated with His people- be preseved and maintained:

"O God, do not remain silent;
do not turn a deaf ear,
do not stand aloof, O God.
See how your enemies growl,
how your foes rear their heads.
With cunning they conspire against your people;
they plot against those you cherish.
"Come," they say, "let us destroy them as a nation,
so that Israel's name is remembered no more." (Psalm 83:1-4)

The psalmist then asks God to neutralize this threat, so that the nations seeking Israel's defeat will themselves see God's power and glory and they themselves call on His Name. The psalmist also asks God to turn these nations into "tumbleweeds"! I admit I have read this psalm at least ten times and missed this- what a wonderful analogy!:

"Make them like tumbleweed, my God,
like chaff before the wind.
As fire consumes the forest
or a flame sets the mountains ablaze,
so pursue them with your tempest
and terrify them with your storm.
Cover their faces with shame, Lord,
so that they will seek your name." (Psalm 83:13-16)

And then the power and righteousness of God will be triumphant, and all will see that He is truly God:

"May they ever be ashamed and dismayed;
may they perish in disgrace.
Let them know that you, whose name is the Lord—
that you alone are the Most High over all the earth." (Psalm 83:17-18)

Psalm 84 is a beautiful tribute to God and His Temple. It has found a variety of modern music settings, notable "How Lovely is Thy Dwelling Place" by Brahms, and "Better is One Day in Your Courts" by Matt Redman. How delightful that the worship music- a Psalm, would find its way into contemporary worship in new forms- all with the intent of praising and glorifying God! His Word is truly timeless, and whenever His people gather to worship there is a connection between all of us thoughout history who have enjoyed and been blessed by praise.

"How lovely is your dwelling place,
Lord Almighty!
My soul yearns, even faints,
for the courts of the Lord;
my heart and my flesh cry out
for the living God.

Even the sparrow has found a home,
and the swallow a nest for herself,
where she may have her young—
a place near your altar,
Lord Almighty, my King and my God.
Blessed are those who dwell in your house;
they are ever praising you." (Psalm 84:1-4)

How wonderful it is to be in the place where God uniquely dwells, where all is in place as a reminder of the great blessing of the presence of the Lord. Nowhere else- especially in the "tents of the wicked" is such a glorious blessing to be found. Prause to the glorious God who blesses His people and inhabits their praise:

"Better is one day in your courts
than a thousand elsewhere;
I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God
than dwell in the tents of the wicked.
For the Lord God is a sun and shield;
the Lord bestows favor and honor;
no good thing does he withhold
from those whose walk is blameless.
Lord Almighty,
blessed is the one who trusts in you." (Psalm 84:10-12)

"Blessed" can be translated "joyous" or "happy" (http://www.biblestudytools.com/dictionaries/bakers-evangelical-dictionary/blessing.html). We are so truly blessed by being in His presence!

Romans 8:19-39

The solid rock of Biblical promise…this is where the believer is welcomed to stand- and to bask in the warmth of the Spirit of God Himself. We journey through life sometimes with oittle understanding and even less joy, but it is simply because we have forgotten to claim the power of God's promises and blessings. I long so many times for a simplre, less hurried and more contemplative life where I had more time to pray through, meditate through, and allow God to breathe through His Scriptures!

The promose is breathtaking- we are the recipients of God's goodness and grace, and thet he will work out everything for our good. We mistakenly believe sometimes that everything will work out for the good as we see it, or as we would like it- but the constant truth is that it is to our good as God sees it. And the Spirit even intercedes for us, when we are at a loss even as to how we should pray: *"In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us through wordless groans.27 And he who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for God's people in accordance with the will of God. And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose."* (Romans 8:27-28)

Then comes still another promise- that we will not simply survive, but that we will be conquerors- in fact, we will be more than conquerors (verse 37): *"What, then, shall we say in response to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things? Who will bring any charge against those whom God has chosen? It is God who justifies. Who then is the one who condemns? No one. Christ Jesus who died—more than that, who was raised to life—is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us. Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? As it is written:*

"For your sake we face death all day long;
we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered."[

No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us." (Romans 8:31-37)

Lastly in this glorious chapter of promises comes one I have leaned on in so many times of trouble, frustration and sometimes depression- the promise that nothing- literally nothing on heaven or earth- or below- can separate us from the love of God as He expressed it in His Son:

"For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord." (Romans 8:38-39) We are truly those blessed people who can confidently be "Standing on the Promises". The hymn by the same name has a back story that is a perfect illustration of the power of a life lived by this abiding principle. The author of this hymn was Russell Kelso Carter (1849-1928): "Although Carter was a professed Christian most of his life, it wasn't until a crisis with his natural heart that he began to understand the reality and power of Bible promises. At age 30, his health was in critical condition and the physicians could do no more for him. Carter turned to God for help and healing. He knelt and made a promise that healing or no, his life was finally and forever, fully consecrated to the service of the Lord. It was from that moment that the written Word of God became alive to Carter. He began to stand upon the promises of healing, determining to believe no matter what his physical condition, no matter how he felt. Over the course of the next several months his strength returned, and his heart was completely healed! Carter lived another healthy 49 years." (http://www.sharefaith.com/guide/Christian-Music/hymns-the-songs-and-the-stories/standing-on-the-promises-the-song-and-the-story.html)

http://biblia.com/books/nrsv/Ro8.28

Psalm 85-87 August 9, 2014 Romans 9

Once again we see the theme of "salvation" in the Psalms. The singer/psalmist is entreating God to restore Israel to peace and prosperity, and freedom from threats and interference by their hostile neighbors, and earnestly please with God to be a Savior. Tis saving act of God that is requested foreshadows the final act of salvation of God- the sending of the Son Jesus as the Savior of the world:

"You, Lord, showed favor to your land;
you restored the fortunes of Jacob.
You forgave the iniquity of your people
and covered all their sins.
You set aside all your wrath
and turned from your fierce anger.
Restore us again, God our Savior,
and put away your displeasure toward us.
Will you be angry with us forever?
Will you prolong your anger through all generations?
Will you not revive us again,
that your people may rejoice in you?
Show us your unfailing love, Lord,
and grant us your salvation." (Psalm 85:1-7)

Paul teaches us in the letter to the church in Rome that "faith comes by hearing" (Romans 10:17), and so it is here. The psalmist promises to listen to God, and the

reward for this is setting things right and providing for righteousness to reign among God's people:

"I will listen to what God the Lord says;
he promises peace to his people, his faithful servants—
but let them not turn to folly.
Surely his salvation is near those who fear him,
that his glory may dwell in our land.
Love and faithfulness meet together;
righteousness and peace kiss each other.
Faithfulness springs forth from the earth,
and righteousness looks down from heaven.
The Lord will indeed give what is good,
and our land will yield its harvest.
Righteousness goes before him
and prepares the way for his steps." (Psalm 85:8-13)

Worship and praise never exist in a vacuum. We worship and praise God because : 1) we wish to celebrate who God is and what he has done; 2) we want to surrender to His will; 3) we want to enjoy His abiding presence through song, prayer and hearing the Word; and 4) we wish to worship because it pleases Him and allows Him to work in our surrendered lives (For a wonderful article on this, please see "Why Faith Matters" by Phillip Wagner http://www.churchleaders.com/worship/worship-articles/161607-philip_wagner_6_essential_reasons_why_worship_matters_worship.html).

The psalmist worships God,, and then calls on God for help and deliverance. There is no real conflict in these two activities- the psalmist has learned that he can fully rely on and trust God for this deliverance:

"Hear me, Lord, and answer me,
for I am poor and needy.
Guard my life, for I am faithful to you;
save your servant who trusts in you.
You are my God; have mercy on me, Lord,
for I call to you all day long.
Bring joy to your servant, Lord,
for I put my trust in you.
You, Lord, are forgiving and good,
abounding in love to all who call to you.
Hear my prayer, Lord;
listen to my cry for mercy.
When I am in distress, I call to you,
because you answer me." (Psalm 86:1-7)

The psalmist then goes further and asks God to teach him the Ways of the Creator, so that he can benefit from following this perfect pattern for his life:

"Teach me your way, Lord,
that I may rely on your faithfulness;

give me an undivided heart,
that I may fear your name.
I will praise you, Lord my God, with all my heart;
I will glorify your name forever.
For great is your love toward me;
you have delivered me from the depths,
from the realm of the dead." (Psalm 86:11-13)

Among the benefits of learning God's Way (verse 11) is that the psalmist then has an "undivided heart". This is similar in meaning and importance to the double (or divided) minded state that James reminds us that we should avoid (James 1:5-8). The undivided mind is free to focus on God and mediatate "day and night" on His commands and precepts (Joshua 1:8)

In closing, the psalmist confidently asks God for protection and refuge from his enemies. He is absolutely confident in God's provision, based on his experiences with God:

"Turn to me and have mercy on me;
show your strength in behalf of your servant;
save me, because I serve you
just as my mother did.
Give me a sign of your goodness,
that my enemies may see it and be put to shame,
for you, Lord, have helped me and comforted me." (Psalm 86:16-17)

The word "Zion" in modern history has a controversial and sometime inflammatory connotation. The movement to restore Israel to the traditional geographic location- to "carve it out of of the British protectorate of Palestine- was called the "Zionist movement". There was both enthusiastic support and violent opposition to this movement from the start (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_Zionism).

The psalmist praises the God who lives in Zion- here both a theological and physical place:

"He has founded his city on the holy mountain.
The Lord loves the gates of Zion
more than all the other dwellings of Jacob.
Glorious things are said of you,
city of God:
"I will record Rahab and Babylon
among those who acknowledge me—
Philistia too, and Tyre, along with Cush—
and will say, 'This one was born in Zion.'" (Psalm 87:1-4)

Here we have a hint as to the dual meaning of the Holy City- the psalmist points out that "all my fountains are in you" (verse 7). It is clear that "all the fountains" of any real country or region would not be physically located in this particular place- so the psalmist is using (as is done extensively elsewhere) poetic license. The fountains referred to here will ultimately reflect the reality of the "Living Water" that Jesus promised to His followers (John 4:14; 7:38).

"The Lord will write in the register of the peoples:
"This one was born in Zion."
As they make music they will sing,
"All my fountains are in you." (Psalm 87:6-7)

Romans 9

Paul was first a Jew- in fact, the Scripture teaches us that Paul was a Pharisee (Acts 23:6; 26:5 and Philippians 3:5). It is understandable that he would have great anguish and sorrow over the rejection of the Gospel by his own people: *"I speak the truth in Christ—I am not lying, my conscience confirms it through the Holy Spirit— I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart. For I could wish that I myself were cursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my people, those of my own race, the people of Israel. Theirs is the adoption to sonship; theirs the divine glory, the covenants, the receiving of the law, the temple worship and the promises. Theirs are the patriarchs, and from them is traced the human ancestry of the Messiah, who is God over all, forever praised! Amen."* (Romans 9:1-5)

The argument then continues that the descendancy from Abraham is not sctrictly physical- God has added the "faithful" to the original line of His chosen people, and that those who have trsuted God and believed in the salvation from Jesus the Son are now on equal footing with God's original chosen people: *"It is not as though God's word had failed. For not all who are descended from Israel are Israel. Nor because they are his descendants are they all Abraham's children. On the contrary, "It is through Isaac that your offspring will be reckoned. In other words, it is not the children by physical descent who are God's children, but it is the children of the promise who are regarded as Abraham's offspring."* (Romans 9:6-8)

God is not lacking in mercy- He is fair and just: *"What then shall we say? Is God unjust? Not at all! For he says to Moses,*
"I will have mercy on whom I have mercy,
and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion."
It does not, therefore, depend on human desire or effort, but on God's mercy. For Scripture says to Pharaoh: "I raised you up for this very purpose, that I might display my power in you and that my name might be proclaimed in all the earth." Therefore God has mercy on whom he wants to have mercy, and he hardens whom he wants to harden." (Romans 9:14-18 quoting Exodus 33:19 and 9:16)

Paul then sorrowfully concludes that his own people, though they had every spiritual advantage, did not achieve the goal of righteousness- even though they pursued it. Ironically, the Gentiles did- even though they historically did not pursue righteousness. The lack of "spiritual blinders" helped the Gentiles quickly see who Jesus was- the Jews had a much more difficult time believing that God was not "one" as they had been taught from birth- something new had happened, and they were (and sadly still are) unable to see it:
"What then shall we say? That the Gentiles, who did not pursue righteousness, have obtained it, a righteousness that is by faith; but the people of Israel, who pursued the law as the way of righteousness, have not attained their goal. Why not?

Because they pursued it not by faith but as if it were by works. They stumbled over the stumbling stone. As it is written:

"See, I lay in Zion a stone that causes people to stumble
and a rock that makes them fall,
*and the one who believes in him will never be put to shame."(*Romans 9:30-33 quoting Isaiah 8:14; 28:16))

http://www.agnusday.org/comics/57/romans-91-5

Psalm 88-89 August 10, 2014 Romans 10

Faith, despair, then back to faith again. Such is the troubled path that so many of us take in our journey. The psalmist was not an exception- he endured days, weeks and even months and years of isolation, grief, and searching for a positive word from God. The very fact that he could say with confidence that God was his Savior points to a faith that endured hardship- even great hardship and adversity:
"Lord, you are the God who saves me;
day and night I cry out to you.
May my prayer come before you;
turn your ear to my cry." (Psalm 88:1-2)
The fact that the psalmist could turn to God at all, and cry out in his pain, shows that there had been a strong and enduring faith established- a connection with the God of the universe that was reliable and lasting. The psalmist then cries out to God for help and reassurance:
"I am overwhelmed with troubles
and my life draws near to death.
I am counted among those who go down to the pit;
I am like one without strength.
I am set apart with the dead,
like the slain who lie in the grave,
whom you remember no more,
who are cut off from your care." (Psalm 88:3-5)

Again the psalmist pleads with God, telling Him of the terrors and hardships that he is enduring, and hoping for an answer or an intervention:

"But I cry to you for help, Lord;
in the morning my prayer comes before you.
Why, Lord, do you reject me
and hide your face from me?
From my youth I have suffered and been close to death;
I have borne your terrors and am in despair.
Your wrath has swept over me;
your terrors have destroyed me.
All day long they surround me like a flood;
they have completely engulfed me.
You have taken from me friend and neighbor—
darkness is my closest friend." (Psalm 88:13-18)

It is a tribute to the raw honesty of Scripture that such a poem/prayer/psalm is presented to us- this is not a "Pollyanna" book where all things are neatly resolved and good is triumphant at everey turn. The Scripture is an honest mirror of the deep feelings of those who wrote it under guidance and inspiration of the Spirit- and is a clear and revelaing look at the reality of life with God. There are dark days, and sometimes we must wait for answers and resolution.

In contrast to the gloom and suffering we see in Psalm 88, Psalm 89 starts with a triumphant statement of praise for God:

"I will sing of the Lord's great love forever;
with my mouth I will make your faithfulness known
through all generations.
I will declare that your love stands firm forever,
that you have established your faithfulness in heaven itself.
You said, "I have made a covenant with my chosen one,
I have sworn to David my servant,
'I will establish your line forever
and make your throne firm through all generations.'"[h]
The heavens praise your wonders, Lord,
your faithfulness too, in the assembly of the holy ones.
For who in the skies above can compare with the Lord?
Who is like the Lord among the heavenly beings?
In the council of the holy ones God is greatly feared;
he is more awesome than all who surround him.
Who is like you, Lord God Almighty?
You, Lord, are mighty, and your faithfulness surrounds you." (Psalm 89:1-8)

As is true with many Psalms, Psalm 89 has inspired modern musical settings, among them are "I Will Sing Forever" by Marty Haugen, "Forever I Will Sing The Goodness of the Lord" by Tim Scoenbachler, and "I Will Sing of the Mercies of the Lord" by James H. Filmore (http://www.hymnary.org/text/i_will_sing_of_the_mercies_of_the_lord_f)

The psalmist goes on to proclaim and celebrate the righteousness, justice and power of God:

"Righteousness and justice are the foundation of your throne;
love and faithfulness go before you.
Blessed are those who have learned to acclaim you,
who walk in the light of your presence, Lord.
They rejoice in your name all day long;
they celebrate your righteousness.
For you are their glory and strength,
and by your favor you exalt our horn.
Indeed, our shield belongs to the Lord,
our king to the Holy One of Israel." (Psalm 89:14-18)

The psalmist celebrates how God raised up David as a powerful and righteous ruler of His people:

"Once you spoke in a vision,
to your faithful people you said:
"I have bestowed strength on a warrior;
I have raised up a young man from among the people.
I have found David my servant;
with my sacred oil I have anointed him.
My hand will sustain him;
surely my arm will strengthen him." (Psalm 89:19-21)

Yet there is sadness, for the people have rejected God and his leadres, and turned to their own ways, forsaking and forgetting the God who blessed them. Then they awake and wonder where the blessings have gone. God has withdrawn His favor and blessing- temporarily- as a "wake up call" to His people:

"How long, Lord? Will you hide yourself forever?
How long will your wrath burn like fire?
Remember how fleeting is my life.
For what futility you have created all humanity!
Who can live and not see death,
or who can escape the power of the grave?
Lord, where is your former great love,
which in your faithfulness you swore to David?
Remember, Lord, how your servant has[I] been mocked,
how I bear in my heart the taunts of all the nations,
the taunts with which your enemies, Lord, have mocked,
with which they have mocked every step of your anointed one.
Praise be to the Lord forever!
Amen and Amen." (Psalm 89:46-52)

And yet there is reason- always- to praise the Lord!

Romans 10

Paul again agonizes over the spiritual blindness of his own people, the Jews. He would like nothing more than to see them realize who Jesus is- the Messiah- and to

joyfully give their lives to Him in praise, service and adoration. Yet they stubbornly resist the truth of the Sonship of Jesus and remain in darkness*: "Brothers and sisters, my heart's desire and prayer to God for the Israelites is that they may be saved. 2 For I can testify about them that they are zealous for God, but their zeal is not based on knowledge. 3 Since they did not know the righteousness of God and sought to establish their own, they did not submit to God's righteousness. 4 Christ is the culmination of the law so that there may be righteousness for everyone who believes."* (Romans 10:1-4) According to Paul, the main problem is that they did not "submit to God's righteousness" (verse 3) and insisted on their own way and own understanding.

The very center of salvation is faith and confession of faith, as Paul describes in the next part of his letter: *"Moses writes this about the righteousness that is by the law: "The person who does these things will live by them." But the righteousness that is by faith says: "Do not say in your heart, 'Who will ascend into heaven?'" (that is, to bring Christ down) "or 'Who will descend into the deep?'" (that is, to bring Christ up from the dead). But what does it say? "The word is near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart," that is, the message concerning faith that we proclaim: If you declare with your mouth, "Jesus is Lord," and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you profess your faith and are saved. As Scripture says, "Anyone who believes in him will never be put to shame." For there is no difference between Jew and Gentile—the same Lord is Lord of all and richly blesses all who call on him, for, "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved."* (Romans 10:5-13) And here we have a central verse in our understanding of God's plan of salvation- verse 9 states *"If you declare with your mouth, "Jesus is Lord," and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved."* (Romans 10:9). This is certainly worth further examination. First we must testify- witness to our faith that Jesus is Lord. Some of us would be delighted to have Jesus serve only as our Savior, but He demands and expects more of us. He desires nothing more than to be the Lord- the ultimate authority- of our lives. If we can truthfully testify that this is our reality, then we are on the road to salvation. The second part states we must "believe in our hearts"- this is the faith that God credited to Abram (Abraham) as righteousness (Gen 15:6).

The Scripture then goes on to interpret itself, as it so often does: *"For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you profess your faith and are saved."* (Romans 10:10). Paul then testifies as to the high calling and great honor and blessing that come to those who proclaim this great message: *"How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them? And how can anyone preach unless they are sent? As it is written: "How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!"*(Romans 10:14-15).

Sadly, many of God's people rejected this message of Good News, as was prophesied in the Scriptures: *"But not all the Israelites accepted the good news. For Isaiah says, "Lord, who has believed our message?" Consequently, faith comes from*

hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word about Christ. But I ask: Did they not hear? Of course they did:

“Their voice has gone out into all the earth,
their words to the ends of the world.”
Again I ask: Did Israel not understand? First, Moses says,

“I will make you envious by those who are not a nation;
I will make you angry by a nation that has no understanding.”
And Isaiah boldly says,

“I was found by those who did not seek me;
I revealed myself to those who did not ask for me.”
But concerning Israel he says,

“All day long I have held out my hands
to a disobedient and obstinate people.” (Romans 10:16-21 quoting Psalm 19:4; Deut 32:21; Isaiah 65:1 and 65:2)

http://www.todayschristianwoman.com/articles/2014/february-week-4/romans-1015.html

Psalm 90-92 August 11, 2014 Romans 11:1-21

The marginal notes in Psalm 90 indicate that the original author of this psalm was Moses. The psalm is a reflection on the mighty works and plans of God for His people, and a tribute to God as a dwelling place and refuge for His people:

"Lord, you have been our dwelling place
throughout all generations.
Before the mountains were born
or you brought forth the whole world,
from everlasting to everlasting you are God.
You turn people back to dust,
saying, "Return to dust, you mortals."
A thousand years in your sight
are like a day that has just gone by,
or like a watch in the night.
Yet you sweep people away in the sleep of death—

they are like the new grass of the morning:
In the morning it springs up new,
but by evening it is dry and withered.
We are consumed by your anger
and terrified by your indignation.
You have set our iniquities before you,
our secret sins in the light of your presence.
All our days pass away under your wrath;
we finish our years with a moan." (Psalm 90:1-9)

We then get an "estimate" of the normal or expected lifetime of man- 70 years, 80 if he has "strength that endures". Some scholars have estimated that modern man could have a life expectancy of 120 years, assuming no genetic issues and normal nutrition. The estimate is based both on population statistics and a phenomenon known as the Hayflick Limit, which describes the maximum number of times a cell can divide (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hayflick_limit) It is fascinating to me that elsewhere in Scripture the lifespan is expected to be 120 years (Genesis 6:3) The lesson here seems to be that whatever our lifespan is, we should enjoy, treasure and value it since it is fleeting- all the more reason to "seek God when he may be found" (Isaiah 55:6-7):

"Our days may come to seventy years,
or eighty, if our strength endures;
yet the best of them are but trouble and sorrow,
for they quickly pass, and we fly away.
If only we knew the power of your anger!
Your wrath is as great as the fear that is your due.
Teach us to number our days,
that we may gain a heart of wisdom." (Psalm 90:10-12)

The psalmist then gives a heartfelt plea that God's favor would rest on His people, and that we would be glad for His presence in our lives:

"Make us glad for as many days as you have afflicted us,
for as many years as we have seen trouble.
May your deeds be shown to your servants,
your splendor to their children.
May the favor of the Lord our God rest on us;
establish the work of our hands for us—
yes, establish the work of our hands." (Psalm 90:15-17)

Protection from the enemy- resting under the watchful care of our God- these are the things we see vividly in Psalm 91. Several years ago our church had the privilege of purchasing bibles for deployed troops- both in Iraq and Afghanistan. We were asked to make an inscription on the inside front cover- and my choice was this Psalm. Who would desire- and inderstand- the value of God's protection more than one who faced danger every day?

"Whoever dwells in the shelter of the Most High
will rest in the shadow of the Almighty.
I will say of the Lord, "He is my refuge and my fortress,
my God, in whom I trust."
Surely he will save you
from the fowler's snare
and from the deadly pestilence.

He will cover you with his feathers,
and under his wings you will find refuge;
his faithfulness will be your shield and rampart.
You will not fear the terror of night,
nor the arrow that flies by day,
nor the pestilence that stalks in the darkness,
nor the plague that destroys at midday.
A thousand may fall at your side,
ten thousand at your right hand,
but it will not come near you.
You will only observe with your eyes
and see the punishment of the wicked." (Psalm 91:1-8)

The psalmist then further describes the protection and care God provides:

"If you say, "The Lord is my refuge,"
and you make the Most High your dwelling,
no harm will overtake you,
no disaster will come near your tent.
For he will command his angels concerning you
to guard you in all your ways;
they will lift you up in their hands,
so that you will not strike your foot against a stone.
You will tread on the lion and the cobra;
you will trample the great lion and the serpent.
"Because he loves me," says the Lord, "I will rescue him;
I will protect him, for he acknowledges my name.
He will call on me, and I will answer him;
I will be with him in trouble,
I will deliver him and honor him.
With long life I will satisfy him
and show him my salvation." (Psalm 91:9-16).

The psalmist promises to "satisfy" God not only by living a long life under His protection, but also by seeking the Lord for salvation! Psalm 91:11-12 was quoted by satan in the second temptation of Jesus after the 40 day fast in the wilderness. Even Satan himself knows Scripture, but not in a saving way (James 2:19)!

http://www.thefellowshipsite.org/psalm-91.html

Psalm 92 is a psalm of praise to God. The psalmist describes the delight he feels and the joy he experiences in worship of the Living God. He also notes that the "wicked" flourish "like grass" but that God is exalted "forever". The secret to understanding why the wicked flourish at all is realizing the time span- they flourish but for a little while, and suffer for eternity!:

"It is good to praise the Lord
and make music to your name, O Most High,
proclaiming your love in the morning
and your faithfulness at night,
to the music of the ten-stringed lyre
and the melody of the harp.
For you make me glad by your deeds, Lord;
I sing for joy at what your hands have done.
How great are your works, Lord,
how profound your thoughts!
Senseless people do not know,
fools do not understand,
that though the wicked spring up like grass
and all evildoers flourish,
they will be destroyed forever.
But you, Lord, are forever exalted." (Psalm 92:1-8)

In great contrast, the righteous will flourish- now and on this earth- and forever in the loving care of God. The imagery of a flourishing tree is similar to that in Psalm 1:3 :

"That person is like a tree planted by streams of water,
which yields its fruit in season
and whose leaf does not wither—
whatever they do prospers." (Psalm 1:3)

The righteous will prosper- and the basis of their prosperity is their love for and abiding faith in God:

"The righteous will flourish like a palm tree,
they will grow like a cedar of Lebanon;
planted in the house of the Lord,
they will flourish in the courts of our God.
They will still bear fruit in old age,
they will stay fresh and green,
proclaiming, "The Lord is upright;
he is my Rock, and there is no wickedness in him."(Psalm 92:12-15)

Romans 11:1-21

Paul tells us clearly that God d not ultimately reject His people Israel, but was always careful to rpeserve a "remnant" who had faith in Him. We see more of this theology in Malchi 3:16:

"Then those who feared the Lord talked with each other, and the Lord listened and heard. A scroll of remembrance was written in his presence concerning those who feared the Lord and honored his name." Paul explains that even when it seemed to

Elijah that he was the “last faithful person left”, there had been a significant number of believers preserved- in this case hidden away: *“I ask then: Did God reject his people? By no means! I am an Israelite myself, a descendant of Abraham, from the tribe of Benjamin. God did not reject his people, whom he foreknew. Don’t you know what Scripture says in the passage about Elijah—how he appealed to God against Israel: “Lord, they have killed your prophets and torn down your altars; I am the only one left, and they are trying to kill me”? And what was God’s answer to him? “I have reserved for myself seven thousand who have not bowed the knee to Baal.” So too, at the present time there is a remnant chosen by grace. And if by grace, then it cannot be based on works; if it were, grace would no longer be grace.”* (Romans 11:1-6)

We could have a multipage discussion over the passage Rom. 11:2 – “whom He foreknew” since this would involve exploration of Calvinism. I will carefully avoid this and other points of discussion (contention?) about this theology, deferring to the many books already written about this theology.

And agin in verses 7-10 we see some of the same Calvinist theology, as the “elect” are mentioned and described as those who remained faithful to God, while others did not:

“What then? What the people of Israel sought so earnestly they did not obtain. The elect among them did, but the others were hardened, as it is written:
“God gave them a spirit of stupor,
eyes that could not see
and ears that could not hear,
to this very day.”
And David says:

“May their table become a snare and a trap,
a stumbling block and a retribution for them.
May their eyes be darkened so they cannot see,
and their backs be bent forever.” (Romans 11:7-10, quoting Deut. 29:4; Isaiah 29:10; Psalm 69:22,23)

We could spend hours- and pages- on a discussion of the “elect” (verse 7) but again I will defer to those more enlightened and sophisticated in their understanding of this complex theology.

Paul then goes into theology about “ingrafting”. He compares Israel to the original plant. Rooted in God Himself. We are not told what kind of plant this is, but later in Romans 11 Paul analogizes about an olive tree, a common and well known plant at that time and place. He states that the gentiles have been “ingrafted” into the branches of the original tree, and enjoy the same benefits as the natural tree. This should not be a source of pride or arrogance, though- Paul reminds his Gentile listeners that God did not spare the original brances: *“Again I ask: Did they stumble so as to fall beyond recovery? Not at all! Rather, because of their transgression, salvation has come to the Gentiles to make Israel envious. But if their transgression means riches for the world, and their loss means riches for the Gentiles, how much greater riches will their full inclusion bring! I am talking to you Gentiles. Inasmuch as I am the apostle to the Gentiles, I take pride in my ministry in the hope that I may somehow arouse my own people to envy and save some of them. For if their*

rejection brought reconciliation to the world, what will their acceptance be but life from the dead? If the part of the dough offered as firstfruits is holy, then the whole batch is holy; if the root is holy, so are the branches. If some of the branches have been broken off, and you, though a wild olive shoot, have been grafted in among the others and now share in the nourishing sap from the olive root, do not consider yourself to be superior to those other branches. If you do, consider this: You do not support the root, but the root supports you. You will say then, "Branches were broken off so that I could be grafted in." Granted. But they were broken off because of unbelief, and you stand by faith. Do not be arrogant, but tremble. For if God did not spare the natural branches, he will not spare you either." (Romans 11:11-21).

Psalm 93-95 August 12, 2014 Romans 11:22-36

The paslmist welcomes us to consider and rejoice in the wonderful attrubutes, power and immaculate character of our living God. He points out that God has been established on His throne forever, and that He alone is endless in majesty and power:

"The Lord reigns, he is robed in majesty;
the Lord is robed in majesty and armed with strength;
indeed, the world is established, firm and secure.
Your throne was established long ago;
you are from all eternity.
The seas have lifted up, Lord,
the seas have lifted up their voice;
the seas have lifted up their pounding waves.
Mightier than the thunder of the great waters,
mightier than the breakers of the sea—
the Lord on high is mighty.
Your statutes, Lord, stand firm;
holiness adorns your house
for endless days." (Psalm 93:1-5)

God is merciful and full of grace, but He also notices and punishes the wicked. The psalmist cries out to God to correct the injustice he sees around him, where the wicked are "jubilant":

"The Lord is a God who avenges.
O God who avenges, shine forth.
2 Rise up, Judge of the earth;
pay back to the proud what they deserve.
3 How long, Lord, will the wicked,
how long will the wicked be jubilant?" (Psalm 94:1-3)

The psalmist then goes on to describe the wicked as "full of boasting" and complaing to God that they "slay the widow, the foreigner and the fatherless":

"They pour out arrogant words;
all the evildoers are full of boasting.

5 They crush your people, Lord;
they oppress your inheritance.
6 They slay the widow and the foreigner;
they murder the fatherless.
7 They say, "The Lord does not see;
the God of Jacob takes no notice." (Psalm 94:4-7)

However, there is a reckoning coming and justice will be established. How fortunate are the ones who God disciplines, for they will escape the pit dug for the wicked:

"Blessed is the one you discipline, Lord,
the one you teach from your law;
13 you grant them relief from days of trouble,
till a pit is dug for the wicked." (Psalm 94:12-13)

God is ultimately in charge and has the last word. His power id eternal, and His judgments are sure. He sees the righteous and the wicked, and He will reward and punish according to the moral framework He has established:

"Can a corrupt throne be allied with you—
a throne that brings on misery by its decrees?
The wicked band together against the righteous
and condemn the innocent to death.
But the Lord has become my fortress,
and my God the rock in whom I take refuge.
He will repay them for their sins
and destroy them for their wickedness;
the Lord our God will destroy them." (Psalm 94:20-23)

Psalm 95 is in two distinct parts. The frst is a joyous worship and celebration of the wonderful and creative God who cares for His people:

"Come, let us sing for joy to the Lord;
let us shout aloud to the Rock of our salvation.
Let us come before him with thanksgiving
and extol him with music and song.
For the Lord is the great God,
the great King above all gods.
In his hand are the depths of the earth,
and the mountain peaks belong to him.
The sea is his, for he made it,
and his hands formed the dry land.
Come, let us bow down in worship,
let us kneel before the Lord our Maker;
for he is our God
and we are the people of his pasture,
the flock under his care." (Psalm 95:1-7)

The image of God's people being a "flock" is certainly reminiscent of the imagery of Psalm 23, where God is seen as the Good Shepherd. Lest we get too proud of ourselves, sheep are some of the least intelligent of all domestic creatures, and follow blindly where they are led! So much for any false pride on our parts.

Then the tone of the psalm abruptly changes. This idyllic and pastoral scene is changed as the psalmist bemoans the inattention, uncaring and indifferent attitude of the people toward God. They don't listen (or even hear), they certainly are not willing to follow but are inclined to be selfish and complain if their needs are not met, such as at Meribah (Exodus 17:7):

"Today, if only you would hear his voice,
"Do not harden your hearts as you did at Meribah,
as you did that day at Massah in the wilderness,
where your ancestors tested me;
they tried me, though they had seen what I did.
For forty years I was angry with that generation;
I said, 'They are a people whose hearts go astray,
and they have not known my ways.'
So I declared on oath in my anger,
*'They shall never enter my rest.'"(*Psalm 95:7-11)

The "rest" referred to in verse 11 is an important item to note. We will see it later in Hebrews 4 (verses 1-3). This "rest" is a place and a state of mind and spirit in which there is a peaceful and intimate communication between God and His children- one of the great blessings of being a "child of the King"!

Romans 11:22-36

Paul then ges on to describe both the "sternness" and "kindness" of God. I am reminded of the motto of the Marine Corps "No worse enemy, no better friend!". Erhaps God is like that, except for the amazing and wonderful gentle and forgiving grace that he patiently extends to His children. Yes, His warth is real and fierce, but His kindness is inexpressibly sweet and pervasive. Paul also reminds the gentiles that the Jews- the "original cultivated" tree, will receive a severed branch as readily (or more readily) than a Gentile (a "wild" branch): *"Consider therefore the kindness and sternness of God: sternness to those who fell, but kindness to you, provided that you continue in his kindness. Otherwise, you also will be cut off. 23 And if they do not persist in unbelief, they will be grafted in, for God is able to graft them in again. 24 After all, if you were cut out of an olive tree that is wild by nature, and contrary to nature were grafted into a cultivated olive tree, how much more readily will these, the natural branches, be grafted into their own olive tree!*" (Romans 11:22-24)

Then there is an amazing statement about the salvation of the Jews, God's original covenant people. The "hardening of their heart" toward the gospel is a part of their ultimate salvation, but only after the complete ("full") number of Gentiles has been saved:

"I do not want you to be ignorant of this mystery, brothers and sisters, so that you may not be conceited: Israel has experienced a hardening in part until the full number of the Gentiles has come in, and in this way all Israel will be saved. As it is written:
"The deliverer will come from Zion;
he will turn godlessness away from Jacob.

And this is my covenant with them
when I take away their sins."(Romans 11:25-27 quoting Isaiah 59:20,21; 27:9 Jer. 31:33,34)

A doxology follows that highlights the mystery and ultimate "unknown" quality of God- He is beyond our feeble efforts to comprehend, and is always shrouded in mystery to us. He has said to us "My thoughts are not your thoughts" (Isaiah 55:8), and we should certainly take Him at His word!

"Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and[i] knowledge of God!
How unsearchable his judgments,
and his paths beyond tracing out!
"Who has known the mind of the Lord?
Or who has been his counselor?"
"Who has ever given to God,
that God should repay them?"
For from him and through him and for him are all things.
To him be the glory forever! Amen." (Romans 11:33-36)

Psalm 96-98 August 13, 2014 Romans 12

So many of the psalms have been put into modern musical settings. One of several I have sung is a setting for Psalm 96 "Sing to the Lord a New Song". The timeless words of the psalmist are brought to a new audience with such composers as K. Lee Scott and Dave and Jean Perry:

"Sing to the Lord a new song;
sing to the Lord, all the earth.
Sing to the Lord, praise his name;
proclaim his salvation day after day.
Declare his glory among the nations,
his marvelous deeds among all peoples." (Psalm 96:1-3)

And we shouls "ascribe to the Lord" great attributes and qualities, as the psalmist suggests:

"Ascribe to the Lord, all you families of nations,
ascribe to the Lord glory and strength.
Ascribe to the Lord the glory due his name;
bring an offering and come into his courts.
Worship the Lord in the splendor of his[a] holiness;
tremble before him, all the earth.
Say among the nations, "The Lord reigns."
The world is firmly established, it cannot be moved;
he will judge the peoples with equity." (Psalm 96:7-10)

Since these attributions are true- not only in an abstract theological way but in our experience- we will naturally worship and praise the God whose qualities we have experienced:

“Let the heavens rejoice, let the earth be glad;
let the sea resound, and all that is in it.
Let the fields be jubilant, and everything in them;
let all the trees of the forest sing for joy.
Let all creation rejoice before the Lord, for he comes,
he comes to judge the earth.
He will judge the world in righteousness
and the peoples in his faithfulness.” (Psalm 96:11-13)

Michael W. Smoth has had a tremendous impact on contemporary (praise) worship. One of the most listened to praise recordings in the US is the album Worship (double platinum), recorded live at Carpenter’s Home Church, Lakeland Florida on June 1, 2001. Daren Whitehead recites the beginning of Psalm 97 as an intro into the song “Let it Rain”- a memorable reading/reciting of the psalm. The power and majesty of God are celebrated in a contemporary and yet tmeless way…the emotion of the psalmist is captured unmistakably. Give it a listen if you haven’t recently!

The psalmist describes for us the power and righteousness of God as He deals with enemies of his peole and of true faith:
“The Lord reigns, let the earth be glad;
let the distant shores rejoice.
Clouds and thick darkness surround him;
righteousness and justice are the foundation of his throne.
Fire goes before him
and consumes his foes on every side.
His lightning lights up the world;
the earth sees and trembles.
The mountains melt like wax before the Lord,
before the Lord of all the earth.
The heavens proclaim his righteousness,
and all peoples see his glory.” (Psalm 97:1-6)
The message is simple- rejoice in the Lord, and lift up His powerful Name, for He is the protector and defender of His people:
“For you, LORD, are the Most High over all the earth;
you are exalted far above all gods.
Let those who love the LORD hate evil,
for he guards the lives of his faithful ones
and delivers them from the hand of the wicked.
Light shines[b] on the righteous
and joy on the upright in heart.
Rejoice in the LORD, you who are righteous,
and praise his holy name.” (Psalm 97:9-12)

Psalm 98 picks up one of the themes of Psalm 96- “Sing to the Lord a new song”. It is not enough that we sing joyously those songs that are familiar- the Lord is worthy

and deserving of “new songs”- our highest creative efforts to bring Him praise and glory! The psalmist reminds us of the mighty saving acts of our God:

“Sing to the Lord a new song,
for he has done marvelous things;
his right hand and his holy arm
have worked salvation for him.
The Lord has made his salvation known
and revealed his righteousness to the nations.
He has remembered his love
and his faithfulness to Israel;
all the ends of the earth have seen
the salvation of our God.” (Psalm 98:1-3)

All the skill that we have in musical performance are to be brought to Him- there is no skill that we cannot fruitfully use in worship of the living God. And we should not always worry about being “respectfully quiet”- there are times we should literally shout:

“Shout for joy to the Lord, all the earth,
burst into jubilant song with music;
make music to the Lord with the harp,
with the harp and the sound of singing,
with trumpets and the blast of the ram’s horn—
shout for joy before the Lord, the King.” (Psalm 98:4-6)

The very earth itself joins in the joyous celebration of the righteousness of God:

“Let the sea resound, and everything in it,
the world, and all who live in it.
Let the rivers clap their hands,
let the mountains sing together for joy;
let them sing before the Lord,
for he comes to judge the earth.
He will judge the world in righteousness
and the peoples with equity.” (Psalm 98:7-9)

Romans 12

The old system of sacrifice has been forever supplanted with the perfect, once and “for all” by the Lamb Jesus. We are then still to offer sacrifice, but of a different nature. Paul urges the church (and us) to offer ourselves as a living sacrifice- dedicated completely to God and His service. By doing so we will be transformed- rebuilt from the inside out (2 Cor 5:17) by God’s amazing power: *“Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship. Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will.”* (Romans 12:1-2)

http://www.columbiaubf.org/2012/01/08/be-transformed-romans-121-8/

One of the greatest enemies of the church and her true fellowship is self righteousness and the attendant false pride that accompanies it. Whem we serve the church and each other in true humility, the barriers and conflicts that could have arisen through false prise are oversome, and the body functons as it should. Paul warns the church in Rome of the dangers of false pride:

For by the grace given me I say to every one of you: Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment, in accordance with the faith God has distributed to each of you. For just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, so in Christ we, though many, form one body, and each member belongs to all the others. We have different gifts, according to the grace given to each of us. If your gift is prophesying, then prophesy in accordance with your faith; if it is serving, then serve; if it is teaching, then teach; if it is to encourage, then give encouragement; if it is giving, then give generously; if it is to lead, do it diligently; if it is to show mercy, do it cheerfully." (Romans 12:3-8)

And love is not just to be admired or thought of or meditated on (although we should do all these things!) but put into practical, daily helpful practice. We are to love each other in the church in practical ways that show our love of God and each other and our appreciation of the gifts and graces that God has given each of us. By doing this, we will overcome evil: *"Do not take revenge, my dear friends, but*

leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: "It is mine to avenge; I will repay," says the Lord. On the contrary:
"If your enemy is hungry, feed him;
if he is thirsty, give him something to drink.
In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head."
Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good." (Romans 12:19-21 quoting Deut. 2:35 and Proverbs 25:21-22)

Psalm 99-102 August 14, 2014 Romans 13

Psalm 99 continues some of the imagery of Psalm 97- the powerful God who is creator, covenant maker and holy protector of His people. The presence of earthquakes must have been a terrifying reality to people of that day, for there seems to be anxiety and fear about the earth being "shaken". One who could litgerally shake the earth is to be feared and reverenced:
"The Lord reigns,
let the nations tremble;
he sits enthroned between the cherubim,
let the earth shake.
Great is the Lord in Zion;
he is exalted over all the nations.
Let them praise your great and awesome name—
he is holy." (Psalm 99:1-3)
The psalmist then instructs us to 'exalt the Lord" because of His justice and holiness:
"The King is mighty, he loves justice—
you have established equity;
in Jacob you have done
what is just and right.
Exalt the Lord our God
and worship at his footstool;
he is holy." (Psalm 99:4-5)
God is interested in our daily activities and plans- after all, He led the people through the wilderness under the guidance of Moses and Aaron- He is also interested in what our plans are and gently prods us to follow His leadership as well:
"Moses and Aaron were among his priests,
Samuel was among those who called on his name;
they called on the Lord
and he answered them.
He spoke to them from the pillar of cloud;
they kept his statutes and the decrees he gave them.
Lord our God,
you answered them;
you were to Israel a forgiving God,
though you punished their misdeeds.
Exalt the Lord our God

and worship at his holy mountain,
for the Lord our God is holy." (Psalm 99:6-9)

Pure praise- pure worship- this is pleasing to the Lord. When His people gather to worship and honor and glorify His name, he is delighted with us- provided it is true worship. Psalm 100 is a song of praise and worship- re- envisioned and reset as "Old 100" (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Old_100th; http://www.hymnary.org/tune/old_hundredth_bourgeois).
It is used in worship across the world as a Doxology or the Hymn "All People That on earth Do Dwell":

"Shout for joy to the LORD, all the earth.
Worship the LORD with gladness;
come before him with joyful songs.
Know that the LORD is God.
It is he who made us, and we are his[b];
we are his people, the sheep of his pasture.

Enter his gates with thanksgiving
and his courts with praise;
give thanks to him and praise his name.
For the LORD is good and his love endures forever;
his faithfulness continues through all generations." (Psalm 100:1-5)

Psalm 101 is concerned with both correct thinking and theology, but is also equally concerned with righteous action. It is not enough to worship and gice praise to God- as important and central as these practices are. We must follow our worship with practieal action that shows our commitment to God. The psalmist lists for God the practices that he performs regularly to insure that he is in keeping with God's Law, plans, decrees and directions for his life:

I will sing of your love and justice;
to you, Lord, I will sing praise.
I will be careful to lead a blameless life—
when will you come to me?

I will conduct the affairs of my house
with a blameless heart.
I will not look with approval
on anything that is vile.
I hate what faithless people do;
I will have no part in it.
The perverse of heart shall be far from me;
I will have nothing to do with what is evil. (Psalm 101:1-4)
The practice of righteousness will be a regular part of the psalmists's life- not an occasional thing. The practice of godliness will be a part of the psalmists' life style:
"Every morning I will put to silence
all the wicked in the land;

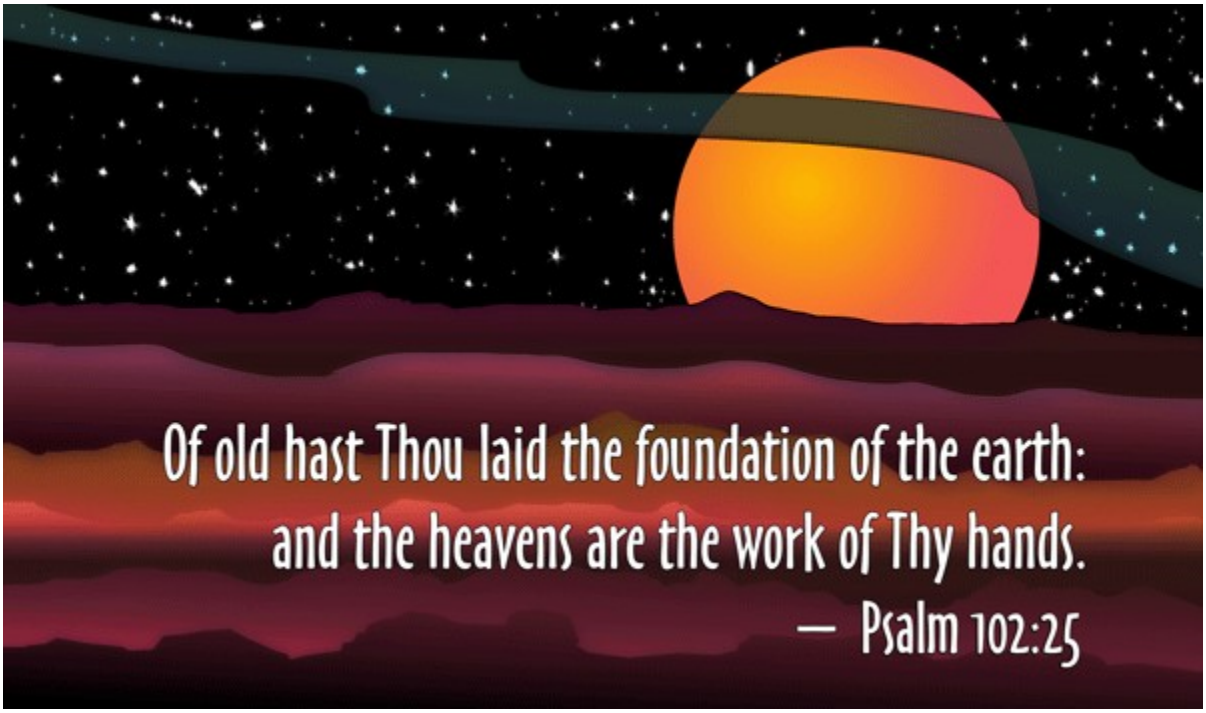
I will cut off every evildoer
from the city of the Lord." (Psalm 101:8)

Sometimes we wander from the care of God- either from our own unfaithfulness or as a reaction to the persecution or harassment of our enemies. When we find ourselves estranged from God, we need to re-establish our relationship with him. The psalmist cries out to God and asks for reconciliation:

"Hear my prayer, Lord;
let my cry for help come to you.
Do not hide your face from me
when I am in distress.
Turn your ear to me;
when I call, answer me quickly.
For my days vanish like smoke;
my bones burn like glowing embers.
My heart is blighted and withered like grass;
I forget to eat my food.
In my distress I groan aloud
and am reduced to skin and bones.
I am like a desert owl,
like an owl among the ruins.
I lie awake; I have become
like a bird alone on a roof.
All day long my enemies taunt me;
those who rail against me use my name as a curse.
For I eat ashes as my food
and mingle my drink with tears
because of your great wrath,
for you have taken me up and thrown me aside.
My days are like the evening shadow;
I wither away like grass." (Psalm 102:1-11).

Although the psalmist has sufferd tragedy- his days have been "cut short"- he still pleads with God for a continued presence in his life:

"In the course of my life he broke my strength;
he cut short my days.
So I said:
"Do not take me away, my God, in the midst of my days;
your years go on through all generations.
In the beginning you laid the foundations of the earth,
and the heavens are the work of your hands.
They will perish, but you remain;
they will all wear out like a garment.
Like clothing you will change them
and they will be discarded.
But you remain the same,
and your years will never end.
The children of your servants will live in your presence;
their descendants will be established before you." (Psalm 102:23-28)



http://dwellingintheword.wordpress.com/2012/06/06/808-psalm-102/

Romans 13

I sometimes wish certain portions of the Scripture were not even in existence. There are parts of Scripture that I find very hard to submit to, much less submit to with any semblance of joyful obeideience, Such is the Scripture in the first aprt of Paul;s letter to the Roam church, chapter 13 (as the letter is now commonly divided. The original letter was simply a letter, divided only by grammar and usage and not numbers and chapters). Submit to the authorities? Sometimes I would rather move to Australia or New Zealand! I am tempted to question God's wisom here, until I realize (once again) that the best way to bring about "Godly change" is to pray for these same folks whose authority I resent and even despise. Sort of reminds me that I am to pray for my enemies- a command equally clear and frustratingly difficult for me to practice.

Paul is quite clear at this point: *"Let everyone be subject to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God. Consequently, whoever rebels against the authority is rebelling against what God has instituted, and those who do so will bring judgment on themselves. For rulers hold no terror for those who do right, but for those who do wrong. Do you want to be free from fear of the one in authority? Then do what is right and you will be commended. For the one in authority is God's servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for rulers do not bear the sword for no reason. They are God's servants, agents of wrath to bring punishment on the wrongdoer. Therefore, it is necessary to submit to the authorities, not only because of possible punishment but also as a matter of conscience.*

This is also why you pay taxes, for the authorities are God's servants, who give their full time to governing. Give to everyone what you owe them: If you owe taxes, pay taxes; if revenue, then revenue; if respect, then respect; if honor, then honor." (Romans 13:1-7). To make the record complete and honest, I also despise paying taxes as well!

Paul then reminds us, as Jesus did, that love is the perfect fulfilment of the Law. If we simply followed the guiding principle of love, and caring for others as we would like to be cared for, we can hardly stray from the path that God has ordained for us. This is amazingly simple to understand, and sometimes frustratingly difficult to actually practice:" Let no debt remain outstanding, except the continuing debt to love one another, for whoever loves others has fulfilled the law." (Romans 13:8) Later in this ection of the letter Paul states this principle again, probably for emphasis: *"Love does no harm to a neighbor. Therefore love is the fulfillment of the law."* (Romans 13:10).

Then we encounter the first "apocalyptic passage" in the Bible reading program so far. We will see several more before this journal/journey is completed! The one thing that strikes me most of all in this short passage is the emphasis on practical righteousness. If the Lord is truly coming soon, then what better could we do than live Spirit filled abundant and loving lives- lives that honor God's love and mercy? Paul commends just this course of action as a faithful response to the nearness of the coming of the Lord: *"And do this, understanding the present time: The hour has already come for you to wake up from your slumber, because our salvation is nearer now than when we first believed. The night is nearly over; the day is almost here. So let us put aside the deeds of darkness and put on the armor of light. Let us behave decently, as in the daytime, not in carousing and drunkenness, not in sexual immorality and debauchery, not in dissension and jealousy. Rather, clothe yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ, and do not think about how to gratify the desires of the flesh."* (Romans 13:11-14)

Psalm 103-104 August 15, 2014 Romans 14

The amazing and wonderful, multifaceted qualities and attributes of God- these are celebrated by the psalmist and a source of wonder and delight to the believer! The names of God have been listed in several places, a summary of the more common ones is at (http://www.holybible.com/resources/names_of_lord.htm; https://www.blueletterbible.org/study/misc/name_god.cfm)

The psalmist declares:
"Praise the LORD, my soul;
all my inmost being, praise his holy name.
Praise the LORD, my soul,
and forget not all his benefits—
who forgives all your sins
and heals all your diseases,
who redeems your life from the pit
and crowns you with love and compassion,
who satisfies your desires with good things

so that your youth is renewed like the eagle's.
The LORD works righteousness
and justice for all the oppressed." (Psalm 103:1-6).

Notice the Names of God, which reflect His character and attrubites: 1) heals Jehovah-Rapha; 2) forgives and redeems Jehovah Tsid-Kenu; 3) the source of righteousness and justice- Jehovah Mekoddishkem. When we truly meditate on the names and qualities, our souls and minds are lifted, enlightened and made glad!

The the psalmist reminds us that God is patient and compassionate, slow to anger and forgiving. One of the key verses in the entire Scripture is Psalm 103:12. The psalmist teaches us that when we repent of a sin and are forgiven of it- it is completely removed from us, and by implication, from the very memory of God. The forgiven and repented of sin is "as far away as east is from west"! What a comfort to those of us who refuse to forgive ourselves of sin, and carry the burden of guilt and shame with us wherever we go.
"He made known his ways to Moses,
his deeds to the people of Israel:
The Lord is compassionate and gracious,
slow to anger, abounding in love.
He will not always accuse,
nor will he harbor his anger forever;
he does not treat us as our sins deserve
or repay us according to our iniquities.
For as high as the heavens are above the earth,
so great is his love for those who fear him;
as far as the east is from the west,
so far has he removed our transgressions from us." (Psalm 103:7-12)
Dave Ramsey, who has made a profession of teaching others how to live debt free, often responds to the question: "How are you?" with the answer "Better than I deserve!". This answer is in a sense a paraphrase of verse10- "He does not treat us as our sins deserve or repay us according to our iniquities.." What a wonderful quality of forgiveness, what an awesome God who loves us that much!

God is truly our Father/parent…the Scriptures attest to this and Jesus Himself spoke lovingly of His Father:
"As a father has compassion on his children,
so the Lord has compassion on those who fear him;
for he knows how we are formed,
he remembers that we are dust.
The life of mortals is like grass,
they flourish like a flower of the field;
the wind blows over it and it is gone,
and its place remembers it no more.
But from everlasting to everlasting
the Lord's love is with those who fear him,
and his righteousness with their children's children—
with those who keep his covenant
and remember to obey his precepts." (Psalm 103:13-18)

He truly understands that we “are dust” but remembers lovingly His children who “keep His covenant”. Thankfully for me, He even loves those who do not keep His covenant perfectly!

What should our response be…? Praise!!
“Praise the Lord, you his angels,
you mighty ones who do his bidding,
who obey his word.
Praise the Lord, all his heavenly hosts,
you his servants who do his will.
Praise the Lord, all his works
everywhere in his dominion.
Praise the Lord, my soul.” (Psalm 103:20-22)

Psalm 104 ends with the same theme as Psalm 103- praise to the almighty, loving father God that rules the created universe with justice and forgiving love!
“I will sing to the Lord all my life;
I will sing praise to my God as long as I live.
34 May my meditation be pleasing to him,
as I rejoice in the Lord.
35 But may sinners vanish from the earth
and the wicked be no more.
Praise the Lord, my soul.
Praise the Lord.” (Psalm 104:33-35).

The first part of psalm 104 is a kind of “mirror refelction” of the descriptive answer God gives to Job in Job 38-39. In the book of Job, God is demanding of Job to answer questions that are unanswerable except by saying- You, Lord! God is telling Job what His creative power and intelligence did at creation, including the creation of a strange creature called the Leviathan (Job 41:1;12; Psalm 104:26). In Psalm 104, the picture is presented not from the point of a challenge from God but as a reflection by man, yet the two have much in common.

Descriptions are given of the marvelous and wonderful world that God has created; the psalmist simply reflects on the wonder of such a created world:
“He set the earth on its foundations;
it can never be moved.
You covered it with the watery depths as with a garment;
the waters stood above the mountains.
But at your rebuke the waters fled,
at the sound of your thunder they took to flight;
they flowed over the mountains,
they went down into the valleys,
to the place you assigned for them.
You set a boundary they cannot cross;
never again will they cover the earth.” (Psalm 104:5-9)
This is a “mirror” of the description given in Job 38:4-11:
“Where were you when I laid the earth’s foundation?
Tell me, if you understand.

Who marked off its dimensions? Surely you know!
Who stretched a measuring line across it?
On what were its footings set,
or who laid its cornerstone—
while the morning stars sang together
and all the angels[a] shouted for joy?

"Who shut up the sea behind doors
when it burst forth from the womb,
when I made the clouds its garment
and wrapped it in thick darkness,
when I fixed limits for it
and set its doors and bars in place,
when I said, 'This far you may come and no farther;
here is where your proud waves halt'?

There are other parallel passages, teaching essentially the same truths about God. The beauty of this all to me is that it so clearly demonstrated the true authorship of all Scripture- the Holy Spirit. The Spirit spoke through these two different earthly authors many years apart and in different situations politically and spiritually, yet the same truth is present in both!

Romans 14

We must carefully avoid judgment in the church. This is not to say that we should not seek discernment or that we should be afraid to call a sin a sin- what we must avoid is judging the sinner. Only God has the wisdom, judgment and discernment (and all the information) necessary for judgment. Judgment invariably leads to self righteousness, false pride and divisions wthin the church: *"Accept the one whose faith is weak, without quarreling over disputable matters. One person's faith allows them to eat anything, but another, whose faith is weak, eats only vegetables. The one who eats everything must not treat with contempt the one who does not, and the one who does not eat everything must not judge the one who does, for God has accepted them. Who are you to judge someone else's servant? To their own master, servants stand or fall. And they will stand, for the Lord is able to make them stand."* (Romans 14:1-4)

Christains even disagree as to which day should be considered the Sabbath- the orginal Saturday, or Sunday- the first day of the week- in honor and remembrance of the Resurrection:
"One person considers one day more sacred than another; another considers every day alike. Each of them should be fully convinced in their own mind. Whoever regards one day as special does so to the Lord. Whoever eats meat does so to the Lord, for they give thanks to God; and whoever abstains does so to the Lord and gives thanks to God." (Romans 14:5-6) The one thing of central importance is that we do all things "as unto the Lord"!

A main rason we should avoid judgment is that we ourselves are under judgment, and but for the grace of God and blood of Jesus would deserve the full measure of

God's wrath. Paul reminds the church that at some future time "every knee shall bow" (Phil. 2:10):
"You, then, why do you judge your brother or sister? Or why do you treat them with contempt? For we will all stand before God's judgment seat. It is written:

"'As surely as I live,' says the Lord,
'every knee will bow before me;
every tongue will acknowledge God.'"
So then, each of us will give an account of ourselves to God." (Romans 14:10-12 quoting Isaiah 45.23)

Then we get to the "main point" of this section of the letter- we are put on this earth to serve and please God- this is the material out of which the Kingdom of God is built:

" For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit, because anyone who serves Christ in this way is pleasing to God and receives human approval.": (Romans 14:17-18). This is a parallel to my "life verse", 1 Corinthians 4:20 *"For the kingdom of God is not a matter of talk but of power."* Power comes from God, and God attends to and strengthens those who spens their lives pleasing Him!

Paul's conclusion is very similar to the wise words of Thomas Campbell about church unity: "In matters of faith, unity; in matters of opinion liberty; in all things, charity." The letter to the Romans puts it this way: *"So whatever you believe about these things keep between yourself and God. Blessed is the one who does not condemn himself by what he approves. But whoever has doubts is condemned if they eat, because their eating is not from faith; and everything that does not come from faith is sin."* (Romans 14:22-23). How important to remember the last sentence- everything that does not come from faith is sin! Faith is the determining factor- faith founded in the Truth of the gospel!

http://www.agnusday.org/comics/63/romans-141-12

Psalm 105-106 August 16, 2014 Romans 15:1-20

Covenant- one of the most important words and concepts in the Hebrew scriptures- Jeremiah was given a vision in which God would write the Law- not on stone tablets,

but on human hearts. God further describes a “new covenant”- not like the one He made at first with His people (Jer. 31:31-34). In Psalm 105, we see a reference to this original covenant- a legally binding agreement between two parties. What makes this covenant extraordinary is that God was the author, establisher and keeper of this covenenat- it was broken on by His people and not by Him:

“He remembers his covenant forever,
the promise he made, for a thousand generations,
the covenant he made with Abraham,
the oath he swore to Isaac.
He confirmed it to Jacob as a decree,
to Israel as an everlasting covenant:
“To you I will give the land of Canaan
as the portion you will inherit.” (Psalm 105:8-11)

And what should our response be to a God who is a covenant maker and promise keeper? Praise and worship- honoring His name and remembering His mighty deeds amons us,His people:

“Give praise to the Lord, proclaim his name;
make known among the nations what he has done.
Sing to him, sing praise to him;
tell of all his wonderful acts.
Glory in his holy name;
let the hearts of those who seek the Lord rejoice.
Look to the Lord and his strength;
seek his face always.
Remember the wonders he has done,
his miracles, and the judgments he pronounced,
you his servants, the descendants of Abraham,
his chosen ones, the children of Jacob.
He is the Lord our God;
*his judgments are in all the earth.” (*Psalm 105:1-7)

The psalmist then recalls the wonderful and myriad ways that God has been faithful to His people, delivering them from slavery and guiding them through the desert and ultimately into the Land He promised them (verses 12-42).

When God’s people remember these mighty acts, they are filled with joy and praise for the loving and faithful God who did all of these wonderful things for them, and they praise His Name:

“He brought out his people with rejoicing,
his chosen ones with shouts of joy;
he gave them the lands of the nations,
and they fell heir to what others had toiled for—
that they might keep his precepts
and observe his laws.
Praise the Lord.” (Psalm 105:43-45)

Praise tand thanksgiving, and rememebering God's loving interventions on behalf of His people- these are the substance of so many of the Psalms. The theme that is explored in Psalm 106 is similar to the wonderful psalm of "pure praise", Psalm 136. The psalm begins:

"Praise the Lord.
Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good;
his love endures forever." (Psalm 106:1)

Alamost the entirety of Psalm 136 is the repetition of the phrase "Give thanks to the Lord for He is good, His love endures forever."

One of the saddest truths in Scripture is that God's people quickly forget His loving intervention and care, almost asking the question "What have yiou done for me lately?". God is saddened and sometimes angered by this faithless response, and His people suffer needlessly- if only they would remember and act accordingly- with humility, thanksgiving and joyful obedience!

He acted on their behalf and saved them yet again:

"But they soon forgot what he had done
and did not wait for his plan to unfold.
In the desert they gave in to their craving;
in the wilderness they put God to the test.
So he gave them what they asked for,
but sent a wasting disease among them.
In the camp they grew envious of Moses
and of Aaron, who was consecrated to the Lord.
The earth opened up and swallowed Dathan;
it buried the company of Abiram.
Fire blazed among their followers;
a flame consumed the wicked.
At Horeb they made a calf
and worshiped an idol cast from metal.
They exchanged their glorious God
for an image of a bull, which eats grass.
They forgot the God who saved them,
who had done great things in Egypt,
miracles in the land of Ham
and awesome deeds by the Red Sea.
So he said he would destroy them—
had not Moses, his chosen one,
stood in the breach before him
to keep his wrath from destroying them.
Then they despised the pleasant land;
they did not believe his promise.
They grumbled in their tents
and did not obey the Lord.
So he swore to them with uplifted hand
that he would make them fall in the wilderness,
make their descendants fall among the nations

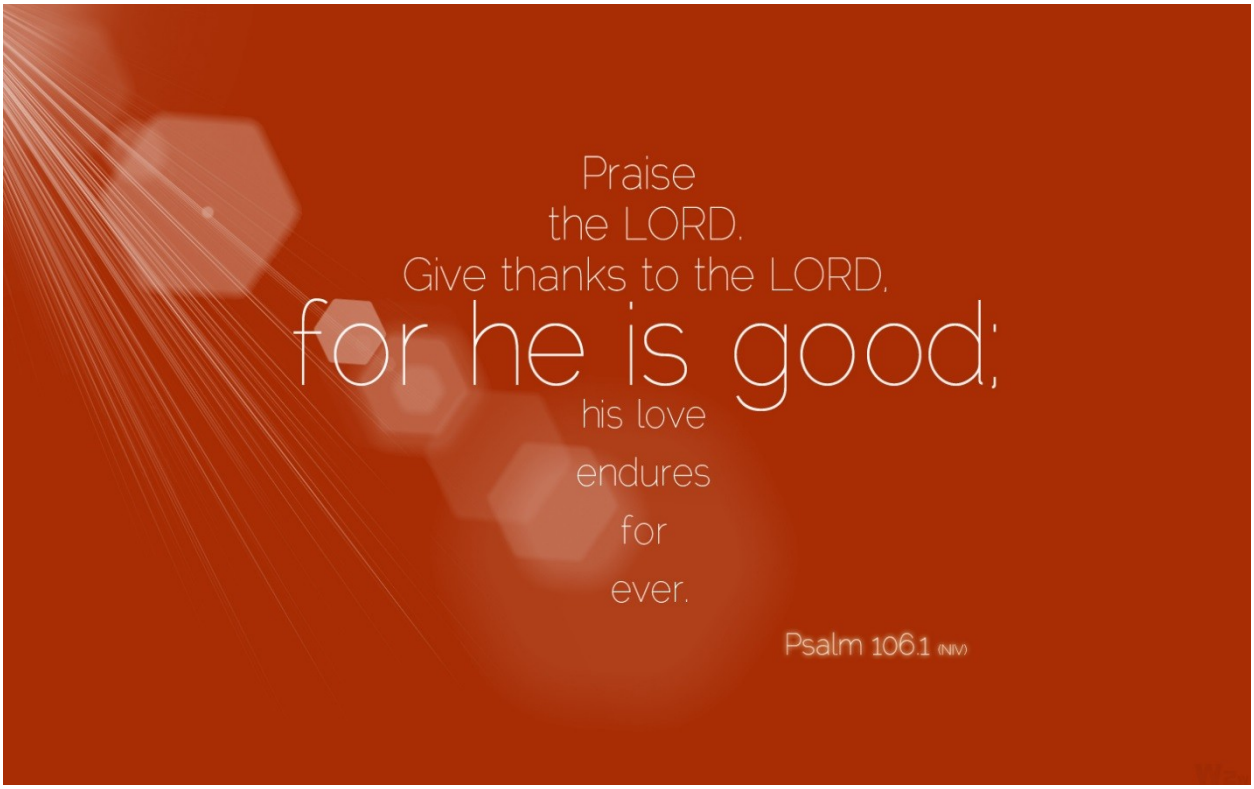
and scatter them throughout the lands." (Psalm 106:13-27)

God instructed the people to destroy those around them who worshipped pagan "gods", yet they did not obey Him and the "gods" became a snare to them- violating in spirit and practice the first commandment- "No other gods before me". Idolatry was the result of this disobedience:

"They did not destroy the peoples
as the Lord had commanded them,
but they mingled with the nations
and adopted their customs.
They worshiped their idols,
which became a snare to them." (Psalm 106:34-36)

Yet God was still merciful. When His people strayed from His commands, got into trouble and suffered for their wrong choices, he was still willing to hear from heaven and forgive them and once again be their God:

"Yet he took note of their distress
when he heard their cry;
for their sake he remembered his covenant
and out of his great love he relented.
He caused all who held them captive
to show them mercy.
Save us, Lord our God,
and gather us from the nations,
that we may give thanks to your holy name
and glory in your praise.
Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel,
from everlasting to everlasting.
Let all the people say, "Amen!"
Praise the Lord." (Psalm 106:44-48)



http://www.open-mike.ca/2013/05/03/day-123/

Romans 15:1-20

Strong and weak- we are all in this adventure called "life" together! Paul urges us to be accepting, loving and forgiving of one another so that we can build each other up in the body of Christ: ***"****We who are strong ought to bear with the failings of the weak and not to please ourselves. Each of us should please our neighbors for their good, to build them up. For even Christ did not please himself but, as it is written: "The insults of those who insult you have fallen on me." For everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through the endurance taught in the Scriptures and the encouragement they provide we might have hope."* (Romans 15:1-4) Jesus never sought to "please Himself", but to serve and bear the burdens of others- including the burden of their sin.

One of the goals of the body of Christ is to gain harmony among believers, so that all are accepted and the gifts and graces of each member are celebrated: *"Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God. For I tell you that Christ has become a servant of the Jews on behalf of God's truth, so that the promises made to the patriarchs might be confirmed and, moreover, that the Gentiles might glorify God for his mercy. As it is written:*
"Therefore I will praise you among the Gentiles;
I will sing the praises of your name."
Again, it says,
"Rejoice, you Gentiles, with his people."
And again,

"Praise the Lord, all you Gentiles;
let all the peoples extol him."
And again, Isaiah says,
"The Root of Jesse will spring up,
one who will arise to rule over the nations;
in him the Gentiles will hope."
May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit." (Romans 15:7-13 quoting 2 Samuel 22:50; Psalm 18:49, Deut. 32:43, Psalm 117:1, Isaiah 11:10) One of the original charges to God's people was to be a "blessing to the Gentiles" (Genesis 12:1-3).

Paul had confidence in the spiritual strength and maturity of those in the church in Rome, yet he felt compelled to "remind" them (and us) of points that they may have forgotten or ignored. All of us are in need of remembrance- all of us forget and must have constant reminders of the Gospel in all its fullness!: *"I myself am convinced, my brothers and sisters, that you yourselves are full of goodness, filled with knowledge and competent to instruct one another. Yet I have written you quite boldly on some points to remind you of them again, because of the grace God gave me to be a minister of Christ Jesus to the Gentiles. He gave me the priestly duty of proclaiming the gospel of God, so that the Gentiles might become an offering acceptable to God, sanctified by the Holy Spirit.*

Therefore I glory in Christ Jesus in my service to God. I will not venture to speak of anything except what Christ has accomplished through me in leading the Gentiles to obey God by what I have said and done—by the power of signs and wonders, through the power of the Spirit of God. So from Jerusalem all the way around to Illyricum, I have fully proclaimed the gospel of Christ. It has always been my ambition to preach the gospel where Christ was not known, so that I would not be building on someone else's foundation." (Romans 15:14-20)
Our best witness, as Paul's is, is recounting "what Christ has accomplished through me…." (verse 18).

Psalm 107-8 August 17, 2014 Romans 15:21-33

The road to redemption can take many different forms- we come to the Lord from a variety of life experiences and starting points. The psalmist has structured Psalm 107 as a story in parts- first there is a statement that the "redeemed" have a story to tell of their individual paths to the same goal- fellowship, redemption and forgiveness:
"Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good;
his love endures forever.
Let the redeemed of the Lord tell their story—
those he redeemed from the hand of the foe,
those he gathered from the lands,
from east and west, from north and south." (Psalm 107:1-3).

The the psalmist lists the different passageways and paths that these redeemed ones took- they all started, as Job did, by turning away from the path that God had called them to travel. First there were those who wandered in the desert:

"Some wandered in desert wastelands,
finding no way to a city where they could settle." (Psalm 107:4)

God found them, ministered to their needs, and redeemed them:

"They were hungry and thirsty,
and their lives ebbed away.
Then they cried out to the Lord in their trouble,
and he delivered them from their distress.
He led them by a straight way
to a city where they could settle.
Let them give thanks to the Lord for his unfailing love
and his wonderful deeds for mankind,
for he satisfies the thirsty
and fills the hungry with good things." (Psalm 107:5-9)

Some even started in jail- there because of their transgressions against God (and man):

"Some sat in darkness, in utter darkness,
prisoners suffering in iron chains,
because they rebelled against God's commands
and despised the plans of the Most High.
So he subjected them to bitter labor;
they stumbled, and there was no one to help." (Psalm 107:10-12)

God redeemed (bought back) these as well, breaking down the bars that imprisoned them:

"Then they cried to the Lord in their trouble,
and he saved them from their distress.
He brought them out of darkness, the utter darkness,
and broke away their chains.
Let them give thanks to the Lord for his unfailing love
and his wonderful deeds for mankind,
for he breaks down gates of bronze
and cuts through bars of iron." (Psalm 107:13-16)

Some, beacause of their sins (iniquities) became "fools" and loathed food…I wonder if they were anorexic- I have never had that particular problem!

"Some became fools through their rebellious ways
and suffered affliction because of their iniquities.
They loathed all food
and drew near the gates of death." (Psalm 107:17-18)

These were also redeemed by God- He healed them and rescued them from the grave:

"Then they cried to the Lord in their trouble,
and he saved them from their distress.
He sent out his word and healed them;
he rescued them from the grave.

Let them give thanks to the Lord for his unfailing love
and his wonderful deeds for mankind.
Let them sacrifice thank offerings
and tell of his works with songs of joy." (Psalm 107:19-22)

Some even went out the sea- a fearful place for those living in the ancient world:

"Some went out on the sea in ships;
they were merchants on the mighty waters.
They saw the works of the Lord,
his wonderful deeds in the deep.
For he spoke and stirred up a tempest
that lifted high the waves.
They mounted up to the heavens and went down to the depths;
in their peril their courage melted away." (Psalm 107:23-26)

When they cried out to God in fear and terror, He was there to calm the sea and bring them safely home- to Him:

"Then they cried out to the Lord in their trouble,
and he brought them out of their distress.
He stilled the storm to a whisper;
the waves of the sea were hushed.
They were glad when it grew calm,
and he guided them to their desired haven.
Let them give thanks to the Lord for his unfailing love
and his wonderful deeds for mankind.
Let them exalt him in the assembly of the people
and praise him in the council of the elders." (Psalm 107:28-32)

God ministered to all His people according to their spiritual state- when they were in need of correction He "caught their attention" with hardship and "desert waste". When they returned to Him they were given the gifts of abundance and joy:

"He turned rivers into a desert,
flowing springs into thirsty ground,
and fruitful land into a salt waste,
because of the wickedness of those who lived there.
He turned the desert into pools of water
and the parched ground into flowing springs;
there he brought the hungry to live,
and they founded a city where they could settle.
They sowed fields and planted vineyards
that yielded a fruitful harvest;
he blessed them, and their numbers greatly increased,
and he did not let their herds diminish." (Psalm 107:33-38).

As Job so aptly put it, God both gives and takes- but His Name is always blessed (Job 1:21)!

Those who are wise spiritually will realize the blessings of a close and personal relationship with their God, and will lead lives filled with praise and thanksgiving:

"The upright see and rejoice,
but all the wicked shut their mouths.

Let the one who is wise heed these things
and ponder the loving deeds of the Lord." (Psalm 107:42-43)

Praise-pure praise- lifted to God as a fragrant offering- this is what Psalm 108 captures and presents to us for our mediattion and benefit. The "Worship" CD by Michael W. Smith begins with these same words:

"My heart, O God, is steadfast;
I will sing and make music with all my soul.
Awake, harp and lyre!
I will awaken the dawn.
I will praise you, Lord, among the nations;
I will sing of you among the peoples.
For great is your love, higher than the heavens;
your faithfulness reaches to the skies.
Be exalted, O God, above the heavens;
let your glory be over all the earth." (Psalm 108:1-5)

The psalmist then celebrates the mighty saving power of God- the power to deliver not only from sin but from eartly enemies:

"Save us and help us with your right hand,
that those you love may be delivered.
God has spoken from his sanctuary:
"In triumph I will parcel out Shechem
and measure off the Valley of Sukkoth.
Gilead is mine, Manasseh is mine;
Ephraim is my helmet,
Judah is my scepter.
Moab is my washbasin,
on Edom I toss my sandal;
over Philistia I shout in triumph." (Psalm 108:6-9)

The psalmist then reminds us, that "our help comes from the Lord" (Psalm 121:2):

"Give us aid against the enemy,
for human help is worthless.
With God we will gain the victory,
and he will trample down our enemies." (Psalm 107:12-13)

Romans 15:21-33

Paul was limited both by his own human frailty as well as "spiritual" hindrances. He refers to one of these limitations and obstacles to the free transmission of the Gospel as prophesied in Isaiah- who saw in his prophetic vision that God's people would be hindered from receiving the Good news due to "spiritual blindness". This is in stark cobtrast to the gentiles, who in may cases received the Gospel with excitement and eagerness:

"Rather, as it is written:
"Those who were not told about him will see,
and those who have not heard will understand."

This is why I have often been hindered from coming to you." (Romans 15:21-22)
Paul then metions a lifetime dream that was never fulfilled- a trip to Spain. There is a significant amount of discussion as to whether or not Paul ever visited the Iberian peninsula (http://johnsonspain.tripod.com/id69.html). It may be that this unfulfilled dream is in Scripture to remind us that even the "giants" of the faith were 9and are) sometimes disappointed and their heartfelt plans unfulfilled- a lesson in humility- God is in chrge and not ourselves!
"But now that there is no more place for me to work in these regions, and since I have been longing for many years to visit you, I plan to do so when I go to Spain. I hope to see you while passing through and to have you assist me on my journey there, after I have enjoyed your company for a while." (Romans 15:23-24)
Paul then closes this section of his letter to the church in Rome with an earnest please for protection- it is not that he does not trust God's protection, but covets the intercessory prayer of others- a blessing both to him and to those who prayed for him: *"I urge you, brothers and sisters, by our Lord Jesus Christ and by the love of the Spirit, to join me in my struggle by praying to God for me. Pray that I may be kept safe from the unbelievers in Judea and that the contribution I take to Jerusalem may be favorably received by the Lord's people there, so that I may come to you with joy, by God's will, and in your company be refreshed. The God of peace be with you all. Amen"* (Romans 15:30-33)

Psalm 109-111 August 18, 2014 Romans 16

The stark contrast between the righteous and the wicked is ever before the psalmist. The marginal notes attribute this psalm to David- who knew firsthand the difference in the life and spiritual state of those who loved God and those who rejected Him. David was also in constant peril for his life during the period of time when Saul was his pursuer. Psalm 109 is a plea to God to destroy the evil one who is relenetlessly pursuing David:

"My God, whom I praise,
do not remain silent,
for people who are wicked and deceitful
have opened their mouths against me;
they have spoken against me with lying tongues.
With words of hatred they surround me;
they attack me without cause.
In return for my friendship they accuse me,
but I am a man of prayer.
They repay me evil for good,
and hatred for my friendship.
Appoint someone evil to oppose my enemy;
let an accuser stand at his right hand.
When he is tried, let him be found guilty,
and may his prayers condemn him.
May his days be few;
may another take his place of leadership.

May his children be fatherless
and his wife a widow.
May his children be wandering beggars;
may they be driven[a] from their ruined homes.
May a creditor seize all he has;
may strangers plunder the fruits of his labor.
May no one extend kindness to him
or take pity on his fatherless children.
May his descendants be cut off,
their names blotted out from the next generation.
May the iniquity of his fathers be remembered before the Lord;
may the sin of his mother never be blotted out.
May their sins always remain before the Lord,
that he may blot out their name from the earth.
For he never thought of doing a kindness,
but hounded to death the poor
and the needy and the brokenhearted.
He loved to pronounce a curse—
may it come back on him.
He found no pleasure in blessing—
may it be far from him.
He wore cursing as his garment;
it entered into his body like water,
into his bones like oil.
May it be like a cloak wrapped about him,
like a belt tied forever around him.
May this be the Lord's payment to my accusers,
to those who speak evil of me." (Psalm 109:1-20).

Some believers have issues with the intensity of the emotion in Psalms. One of my former pastors, Alan Smith, quoted a parishioner who he served as saying "I can be a Christian as long as I don't read the psalms." What a sad commentary! God is not approving violence or hatred or any desire for revenge among His people- the psalms simply are a mirror of ourselves- with all our "messy" emotions and feelings, our unresolved guilt and pure ambition.

The second half of Psalm 109 starting with the hinge word "but"- the psalmist is contrasting the evil of the enemy with the goodness, love and provision of God. David knew God intimately, and had learned to trust Him for everything- including his life on a number of occasions. David knew from his heart and experience that God was the Rock, the Provider, the healer and Protector:

"But you, Sovereign Lord,
help me for your name's sake;
out of the goodness of your love, deliver me.
For I am poor and needy,
and my heart is wounded within me.
I fade away like an evening shadow;

I am shaken off like a locust.
My knees give way from fasting;
my body is thin and gaunt.
I am an object of scorn to my accusers;
when they see me, they shake their heads.
Help me, Lord my God;
save me according to your unfailing love.
Let them know that it is your hand,
that you, Lord, have done it.
While they curse, may you bless;
may those who attack me be put to shame,
but may your servant rejoice.
May my accusers be clothed with disgrace
and wrapped in shame as in a cloak.
With my mouth I will greatly extol the Lord;
in the great throng of worshipers I will praise him.
For he stands at the right hand of the needy,
to save their lives from those who would condemn them." (Psalm 109:21-31)

Some of the Psalms are full of Messianic references, hints and types. Psalm 110, also attributed to David, is one of these (http://americanvision.org/1909/importance-of-psalm/). Jesus quoted Psalm 110 when He was challenging the wisdom and knowledge of the "experts" of the Law in Matthew 22:41-45 and also Matthew 26:64, in which Jesus refers to the Son of Man in His glory *"But I say to all of you: From now on you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven."*

This short Psalm (7 verses) is a source of much of our Messianic understanding- it foreshadows and shapes expectations about the coming Messiah- Jesus Himself!

"The Lord says to my lord:
Sit at my right hand
until I make your enemies
a footstool for your feet."
The Lord will extend your mighty scepter from Zion, saying,
"Rule in the midst of your enemies!"
Your troops will be willing
on your day of battle.
Arrayed in holy splendor,
your young men will come to you
like dew from the morning's womb.
The Lord has sworn
and will not change his mind:
"You are a priest forever,
in the order of Melchizedek."
The Lord is at your right hand[d];
he will crush kings on the day of his wrath.
He will judge the nations, heaping up the dead

and crushing the rulers of the whole earth.
He will drink from a brook along the way,
and so he will lift his head high." (Psalm 110:1-7)

So we see Jesus as conquerer (verses 1-3), priest (verse 4) and ruler (verses 5-7)- all of these roles were fulfilled in absolute perfection by our King Jesus.

http://www.oneyearbibleblog.com/2014/05/may-14th-one-year-bible-readings.html

Psalm 111 is a song of pure praise. In it we see the glorious personality, actions and attributes of our living God. The psalmist is compelled- by joy and gladness- to lift up God's name in the company of other worshippers:

"Praise the Lord.
I will extol the Lord with all my heart
in the council of the upright and in the assembly." (Psalm 111:1)

Then the attributes and gracious acts of God are remembered and celebrated:

"Great are the works of the Lord;
they are pondered by all who delight in them.
Glorious and majestic are his deeds,
and his righteousness endures forever.
He has caused his wonders to be remembered;
the Lord is gracious and compassionate.
He provides food for those who fear him;
he remembers his covenant forever.
He has shown his people the power of his works,
giving them the lands of other nations.
The works of his hands are faithful and just;
all his precepts are trustworthy.
They are established for ever and ever,
enacted in faithfulness and uprightness.

He provided redemption for his people;
he ordained his covenant forever—
holy and awesome is his name." (Psalm 111:2-9)

God's works are pondered by those who "delight in them" (verse 2); His works and righteousness are remembered and "endure forever" (verse 3); He is the provider (verse 4); He is righteous (verse 7) and His works are enacted in "faithfulness and uprightness" (verse 8); and He is the covenant maker and keeper (verse 9).

The psalmist then offers us wisdom and guidance- that the "fear of the Lord" is the beginning of wisdom. This theme echoes throught the Scriptures, starting with Psalm 1 (1-3) and continuing througb Proverbs (1:7 and 9:10) and Ecclesiastes 12, in which the seeker of true joy and abundant life is urged to "remember God" and remember Him with reverence and respect!

"The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom;
all who follow his precepts have good understanding.
To him belongs eternal praise." (Psalm 111:10)

Romans 16

And now the time has come to give greetings to the many who have sacrificed, loved, supported and in many other ways helped Paul in his efforts to establish and maintain a flourishing church in Rome. Paul is effusive in his praise for those who have helped him in his labors, and names many of them- thus preserving their names forever as examples to us as devoted followers and disciples: *"I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a deacon of the church in Cenchreae. I ask you to receive her in the Lord in a way worthy of his people and to give her any help she may need from you, for she has been the benefactor of many people, including me.*

Greet Priscilla and Aquila, my co-workers in Christ Jesus. They risked their lives for me. Not only I but all the churches of the Gentiles are grateful to them. Greet also the church that meets at their house. Greet my dear friend Epenetus, who was the first convert to Christ in the province of Asia. Greet Mary, who worked very hard for you. Greet Andronicus and Junia, my fellow Jews who have been in prison with me. They are outstanding among the apostles, and they were in Christ before I was. Greet Ampliatus, my dear friend in the Lord. Greet Urbanus, our co-worker in Christ, and my dear friend Stachys. Greet Apelles, whose fidelity to Christ has stood the test. Greet those who belong to the household of Aristobulus. Greet Herodion, my fellow Jew. Greet those in the household of Narcissus who are in the Lord. Greet Tryphena and Tryphosa, those women who work hard in the Lord. Greet my dear friend Persis, another woman who has worked very hard in the Lord. Greet Rufus, chosen in the Lord, and his mother, who has been a mother to me, too. Greet Asyncritus, Phlegon, Hermes, Patrobas, Hermas and the other brothers and sisters with them. Greet Philologus, Julia, Nereus and his sister, and Olympas and all the Lord's people who are with them. Greet one another with a holy kiss." (Romans 16:1-16)

Paul then warns them (again) about the dangers of divisiveness in the church: *"I urge you, brothers and sisters, to watch out for those who cause divisions and put*

obstacles in your way that are contrary to the teaching you have learned. Keep away from them. For such people are not serving our Lord Christ, but their own appetites. By smooth talk and flattery they deceive the minds of naive people. Everyone has heard about your obedience, so I rejoice because of you; but I want you to be wise about what is good, and innocent about what is evil." (Romans 16:17-19)

He reminds them that God has triumphed over evil, once and for al, and that the grace of Jesus is always availablel: *The God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet.*
The grace of our Lord Jesus be with you. (Romans 16:20).

Finally Paul leaves the church this benediction: *"Now to him who is able to establish you in accordance with my gospel, the message I proclaim about Jesus Christ, in keeping with the revelation of the mystery hidden for long ages past, but now revealed and made known through the prophetic writings by the command of the eternal God, so that all the Gentiles might come to the obedience that comes from faith— to the only wise God be glory forever through Jesus Christ! Amen."* (Romans 16:25-27)

Psalm 112-115 August 19, 2014 1 Corinthians 1

Acrostic poems are found in several places in Scripture. The most notable example is Psalm 119, a series of meditations of the beauty, utility and practical usefulness of the Law in guiding our behavior and faith toward the living God. Psalm 112 is also an acrostic, according to the NIV marginal notes: "This psalm is an acrostic poem, the lines of which begin with the successive letters of the Hebrew alphabet." We do not know the identity of the author, but that in no way detracts from the beauty and utility of this lovely song of worship and praise.
The psalmist contrasts the life experiences of the righteous and the wicked:
"Praise the Lord.
Blessed are those who fear the Lord,
who find great delight in his commands.
Their children will be mighty in the land;
the generation of the upright will be blessed.
Wealth and riches are in their houses,
and their righteousness endures forever.
Even in darkness light dawns for the upright,
for those who are gracious and compassionate and righteous.
Good will come to those who are generous and lend freely,
who conduct their affairs with justice.
Surely the righteous will never be shaken;
they will be remembered forever." (Psalm 112:1-6)
The phrase "praise the Lord" in verse 1 is often seen in the psalms- the Hebrew is "Hallelu Yah" which we commonly anglicize to "halleluiah". The righteous are on solid ground, both literally and spiritually- they will "never be shaken" (verse 6). Not so the wicked:

The wicked will see and be vexed,
they will gnash their teeth and waste away;
the longings of the wicked will come to nothing. (Psalm 112:10). It is entirely possible that both the righteous and the wicked "see" ther same thing, one is delighted and the other (the wicked) is "vexed". It's a matter of trust and perspective!

Psalm 113 is "pure praise". As is seen in many other praise songs used in worship, the pdsalmist lifts up and rejoices in the amazing care and provision, the righteousness and goodness of God's actions toward us:

"Praise the Lord.
Praise the Lord, you his servants;
praise the name of the Lord.
Let the name of the Lord be praised,
both now and forevermore.
From the rising of the sun to the place where it sets,
the name of the Lord is to be praised.
The Lord is exalted over all the nations,
his glory above the heavens.
Who is like the Lord our God,
the One who sits enthroned on high,
who stoops down to look
on the heavens and the earth?
He raises the poor from the dust
and lifts the needy from the ash heap;
he seats them with princes,
with the princes of his people.
He settles the childless woman in her home
as a happy mother of children.
Praise the Lord." (Psalm 113:1-9)

This short (9 verses) psalm begins and ends with praise, and describes Gods's glory (verse 4); His position as King of all (verse 5); His ministry to the poor (verse 7) and His provision of the blessing of children to the childless woman (verse 9). This is certainly worthy of note, for in those times God's favor was strongly related to His sending children to the faithful.

Psalm 114 is a tribute to the amazing power of our God. Here God is seen as deliverer of His people from Egypt, as well as a power that is over the very world He created. The might and power of God are to be celebrated and praised, for His hand provides and protects:

"When Israel came out of Egypt,
Jacob from a people of foreign tongue,
Judah became God's sanctuary,
Israel his dominion.
The sea looked and fled,
the Jordan turned back;

the mountains leaped like rams,
the hills like lambs.
Why was it, sea, that you fled?
Why, Jordan, did you turn back?
Why, mountains, did you leap like rams,
you hills, like lambs?
Tremble, earth, at the presence of the Lord,
at the presence of the God of Jacob,
who turned the rock into a pool,
the hard rock into springs of water." (Psalm 114:1-8)

Where should glory and praise go? To us, or to the God who made us? The answer that the psalmist gives in psalm 115 is that all the praise and glory should go to God. He is worthy, He is creator, He is the true and living God. THos ewho worship idols are worshiping and honoring lifeless creations made from their own hands- the psalmist states that these idol worshippers are as dead as the idols they worship (verse 8):

"Not to us, Lord, not to us
but to your name be the glory,
because of your love and faithfulness.
Why do the nations say,
"Where is their God?"
Our God is in heaven;
he does whatever pleases him.
But their idols are silver and gold,
made by human hands.
They have mouths, but cannot speak,
eyes, but cannot see.
They have ears, but cannot hear,
noses, but cannot smell.
They have hands, but cannot feel,
feet, but cannot walk,
nor can they utter a sound with their throats.
Those who make them will be like them,
and so will all who trust in them." (Psalm 115:1-8)

When we remember, worship and honor God then we benefit from His presence and blessing. No more obvious sign of God's blessing was the "flourishing" experienced by God's people- when God blessed the land then it produced abundantly, there was peace in the land and the people "flourished"! (verse 14):

"All you Israelites, trust in the Lord—
he is their help and shield.
House of Aaron, trust in the Lord—
he is their help and shield.
You who fear him, trust in the Lord—
he is their help and shield.
The Lord remembers us and will bless us:

He will bless his people Israel,
he will bless the house of Aaron,
he will bless those who fear the Lord—
small and great alike.
May the Lord cause you to flourish,
both you and your children.
May you be blessed by the Lord,
the Maker of heaven and earth." (Psalm 115:9-15)

The psalmist then makes a key point- God is the God of the living, not of the dead (verse 17)! Jesus pointed this out to the "experts" of the Law when challenged as to His teaching about the resurrection, in the form of a "trick" question about marriage (Matthew 22:32; Mark 12:27, Luke 20:38). This is a glimpse into the reality of the eternity we will enjoy with God- He created us with a "longing for eternity" (Eccles. 3:11):

"The highest heavens belong to the Lord,
but the earth he has given to mankind.
It is not the dead who praise the Lord,
those who go down to the place of silence;
it is we who extol the Lord,
both now and forevermore.
Praise the Lord." (Psalm 115:16-18).

1 Corinthians 1

Paul's letter to the church in Corinth should be understood in context. Corinth was a city known for both its diversity and vigor- it was a city literally re-built less than a century before Paul visited to plant a church there (http://gbgm-umc.org/umw/corinthians/city.stm)

Its location was advantageous- it was a center of commerce and trade, strategically located near an isthmus connecting the two "lower parts"of Greece.

Paul begins his letter, as he often does, with a warm and personal greeting, thanking God for the faith and leadership he has encountered in the body of believers: *"Paul, called to be an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and our brother Sosthenes, To the church of God in Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus and called to be his holy people, together with all those everywhere who call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ—their Lord and ours: Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. I always thank my God for you because of his grace given you in Christ Jesus. For in him you have been enriched*

in every way—with all kinds of speech and with all knowledge— God thus confirming our testimony about Christ among you." (1 Cor. 1:1-6)

Not to belabor a point, or perhaps just to repeat- it is clear to me and most conservative scholars that Paul wrote this letter. Tradition attrubutes this letter to Paul, and the opening words of the letter clearly identify Paul as the author. It is only the proponents of "higher criticism" that challenge this authorship, and they for reasons of "stylistic and grammatical similarities" and pointing out (correctly for once) that sometimes Paul dictated a letter, and may not have actually put "pen to paper". Authorsip, though, is certainly a larger concept than "writing"- there are many examples of "dictated" works whose authorship is not similarly challenged. It may be (as I suppose) that there are simply those who wish to judge Scripture, instead of allowing it (and the Spirit, its true author) to judge them! Please see (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/First_Epistle_to_the_Corinthians; http://www.mycrandall.ca/courses/ntintro/1cor.htm)

Paul is genuinely thankful for this body of believers, and he testifies that they have exhibited many of the gifts of the Spirit: *"Therefore you do not lack any spiritual gift as you eagerly wait for our Lord Jesus Christ to be revealed. He will also keep you firm to the end, so that you will be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. God is faithful, who has called you into fellowship with his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord."* (1 Cor. 1:7-9). Paul is confident that God will rpeserve and "keep" these believers "firm unto the end" (verse 8)

However, there are real problems in this real church made up of real people, just as today. Paul appeals to them for unity- that they become of one mind in the foundational beliefs that define them as a true church: *"I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree with one another in what you say and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be perfectly united in mind and thought. My brothers and sisters, some from Chloe's household have informed me that there are quarrels among you. What I mean is this: One of you says, "I follow Paul"; another, "I follow Apollos"; another, "I follow Cephas"; still another, "I follow Christ." Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Were you baptized in the name of Paul? I thank God that I did not baptize any of you except Crispus and Gaius, so no one can say that you were baptized in my name. (Yes, I also baptized the household of Stephanas; beyond that, I don't remember if I baptized anyone else.) For Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the gospel—not with wisdom and eloquence, lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power."* (1 Cor.:10-17). It appears that the division here centers on the issue of who to "follow" or whose allegiance the people of the church will have. Paul urges them to realize that Christ was "not divided" (verse 13), and that the preson who baptized you does not automatically claim your lifetime loyalty. Paul states that his mission was not "to baptize, but to rpeach the gospel" (verse 17). In Corinth, as in the church today, the struggle is to keep the "main thing" the main thing! It is not important that we all worship in the same way, or at the same day of the week, or with "praise" or "traditonal" or even "blended" worship. The main thing is that we worship a crucified and risen Jesus, and that we trust Him for salvation- and everything else!

Paul then pointedly reminds them of the cross- and its message both as the bearer of the crucified One and the empty cross that symbolizes the resurrection*: "For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. For it is written:*
"I will destroy the wisdom of the wise;
the intelligence of the intelligent I will frustrate."
Where is the wise person? Where is the teacher of the law? Where is the philosopher of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not know him, God was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached to save those who believe. Jews demand signs and Greeks look for wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For the foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than human strength." (1 Cor. 1:18-25, quoting Isaiah 29:14)

Paul then goes on to remind them of who they were before becoming followes of the Risen Jesus- they were ordinary people, wandering the earth without the Truth of the Resurrection, without the hope of eternal life, and without the promise of a tomorrow with God: *"Brothers and sisters, think of what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth. But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. God chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things—and the things that are not—to nullify the things that are, so that no one may boast before him. It is because of him that you are in Christ Jesus, who has become for us wisdom from God—that is, our righteousness, holiness and redemption. Therefore, as it is written: "Let the one who boasts boast in the Lord."* (1 Cor. 1:26-31, quoting Jer. 9:24) We were neither wise, strong, or of high position- but God chose us and agev us the incomparable gifts of righteousness, holiness and redemption (verse 30). We literally had nothing- and were nothing- to brag about, but now we can brag/boast about our God!

Psalm 116-118 August 20, 2014 I Corinthians 2

Why do we love God? Im many cases it is out of our profound gratitude over the saving acts He has done for us- even to save us from death itself. The psalmist praises God, and thanks Him for his very deliverance from death:
"I love the Lord, for he heard my voice;
he heard my cry for mercy.
Because he turned his ear to me,
I will call on him as long as I live.
The cords of death entangled me,
the anguish of the grave came over me;
I was overcome by distress and sorrow.
Then I called on the name of the Lord:
"Lord, save me!"

The Lord is gracious and righteous;
our God is full of compassion.
The Lord protects the unwary;
when I was brought low, he saved me.
Return to your rest, my soul,
for the Lord has been good to you.
For you, Lord, have delivered me from death,
my eyes from tears,
my feet from stumbling,
that I may walk before the Lord
in the land of the living." (Psalm 116:1-9)

Our compassionate and loving God- full of His incomparable grace, saves us from harm- often the harm that is the consequence of our own bad choices. Only in God do we find real "rest" (verse 7).

The psalmist then asks an important and central question- wht cen we offer to God? The answr takes several forms- praise, sacrifice, worship, and ultimately, our very selves to Him:

"What shall I return to the Lord
for all his goodness to me?
I will lift up the cup of salvation
and call on the name of the Lord.
I will fulfill my vows to the Lord
in the presence of all his people.
Precious in the sight of the Lord
is the death of his faithful servants.
Truly I am your servant, Lord;
I serve you just as my mother did;
you have freed me from my chains.
I will sacrifice a thank offering to you
and call on the name of the Lord.
I will fulfill my vows to the Lord
in the presence of all his people,
in the courts of the house of the Lord—
in your midst, Jerusalem.
*Praise the Lord." (*Psalm 116:12-19)

Psalm 117 is very short- only 2 verses. It may have been used as a poetic/musical interlude or "chorus" during worship, or most likely as a "call to worship" (http://theorchardefc.org/you-are-called-to-worship/) Its short length belies its omportance and message:

"Praise the Lord, all you nations;
extol him, all you peoples.
For great is his love toward us,
and the faithfulness of the Lord endures forever." (Psalm 117:1-2)

Whom shall we praise? The Lord Himself, and Him only. There is no place for idolatry of any kind in true worship. We should "extol" God- which means "praise

enthusiastically, go into raptures about/over, wax lyrical about, sing the praises of, praise to the skies, acclaim, exalt, eulogize, adulate, rhapsodize over, rave about, enthuse about/ove'"
(https://www.google.com/?gws_rd=ssl#q=extol) We cheer a touchdown on the foorball file, a game winning home run in baseball, but sometimes barely can be heard praising our God in worship! His love- the only true love- is "great" toward us (He is "rich in mercy" Ephesains 2:4) and His faithfulness endures forever- it is the eternal Rock on which we can base our faith lives.

Psalm 118 is another of the echo/parallels of Psalm 136- "Give thanks to the Lord, for He is good, His love endures forever". This is the basis (Psalm 136) for one of my personal favorite praise songs "Forever" by Michael W. Smith. What do we have to fear if our good God endures forever- we know, love and trust Him- He is always our companion:

"Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good;
his love endures forever.
Let Israel say:
"His love endures forever."
Let the house of Aaron say:
"His love endures forever."
Let those who fear the Lord say:
"His love endures forever." (Psalm 118:1-4)

The psalmist testifies that he called on the Lord in hardship and in danger(how often is this the time that we passionately cry out to God?) and he found the Lord to be a refuge, and a means of overcoming the enemies that surrounded him:

"When hard pressed, I cried to the Lord;
he brought me into a spacious place.
The Lord is with me; I will not be afraid.
What can mere mortals do to me?
The Lord is with me; he is my helper.
I look in triumph on my enemies.
It is better to take refuge in the Lord
than to trust in humans.
It is better to take refuge in the Lord
than to trust in princes.
All the nations surrounded me,
but in the name of the Lord I cut them down.
They surrounded me on every side,
but in the name of the Lord I cut them down.
They swarmed around me like bees,
but they were consumed as quickly as burning thorns;
in the name of the Lord I cut them down.
I was pushed back and about to fall,
but the Lord helped me.
The Lord is my strength and my defense;
he has become my salvation." (Psalm 118:5-14).

Just because God saves us it does not mean that we escape all consequences- He "chastens" us (verse 18) for our own good- this is sometimes our "wake up call":

I will not die but live,
and will proclaim what the Lord has done.
The Lord has chastened me severely,
but he has not given me over to death.
Open for me the gates of the righteous;
I will enter and give thanks to the Lord.
This is the gate of the Lord
through which the righteous may enter.
I will give you thanks, for you answered me;
you have become my salvation." (Psalm 118:17-21)

Then we see a key prophesy, and a quote that Jesus used to confront His enemies (Matthew 21:42). Jesus is "the cornerstone" (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cGAbF7D4iFU):

"The stone the builders rejected
has become the cornerstone;
the Lord has done this,
and it is marvelous in our eyes.
The Lord has done it this very day;
let us rejoice today and be glad." (Psalm 118:22-24)

The psalmist then pleads for God to save "us"- the whole people of God. He praises God, remarks on how "blessed" (full of the joy of the Lord, "happy") is the one who comes in the Nem of the Lord, and ends with the phrase used at the beginning- both for emphasis and as a structural parallel:"

"Lord, save us!
Lord, grant us success!
Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.
From the house of the Lord we bless you.[d]
The Lord is God,
and he has made his light shine on us.
With boughs in hand, join in the festal procession
up to the horns of the altar.
You are my God, and I will praise you;
you are my God, and I will exalt you.
Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good;
his love endures forever." (Psalm 118:25-29)

I Corinthians 2

Paul shows his humility and servant's heart by pointing his listeners to the true source of power, the Holy Sirit that empowers him: *"And so it was with me, brothers and sisters. When I came to you, I did not come with eloquence or human wisdom as I proclaimed to you the testimony about God. For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. I came to you in*

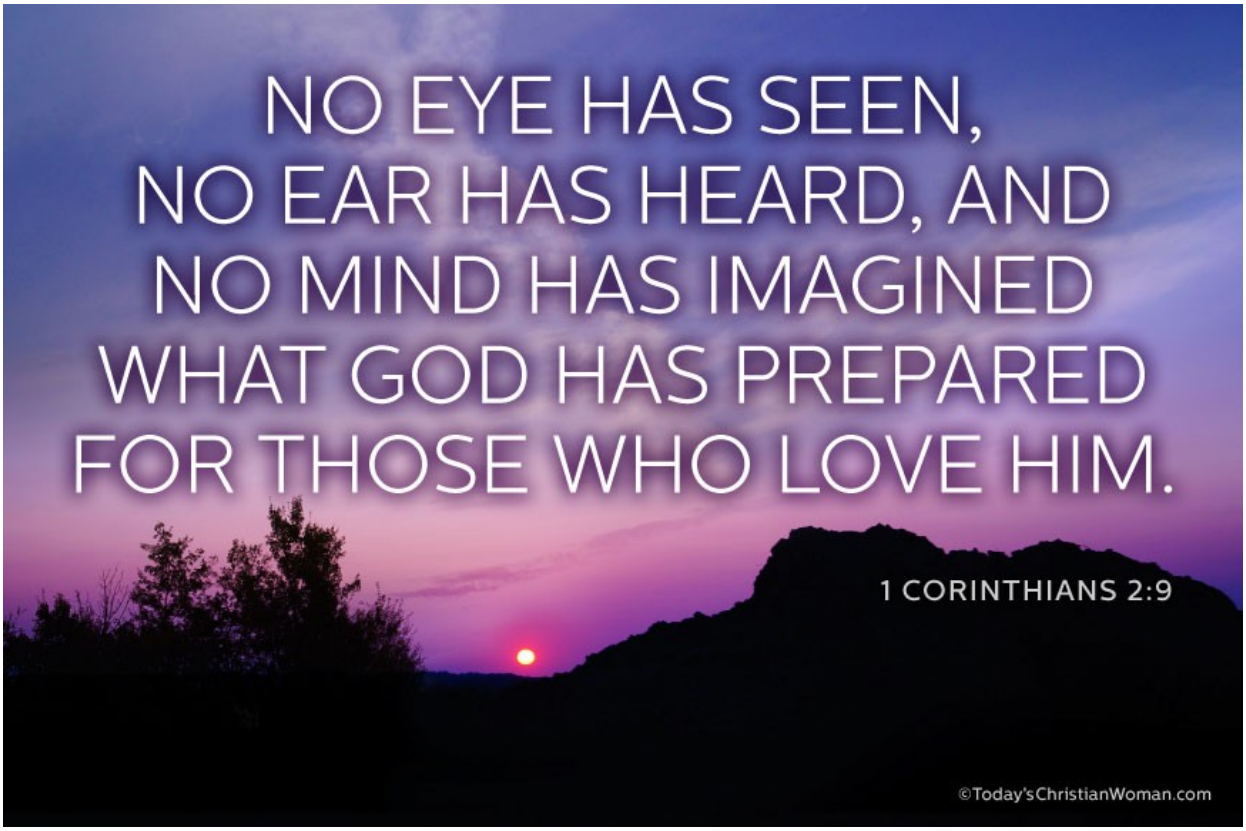
weakness with great fear and trembling. My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit's power, so that your faith might not rest on human wisdom, but on God's power." (1 Corinthians 2:1-5) He is saying in so many words" I's not about me- it's about God. I'm nothing special, but God is infinitely special! Ne of the important truths Paul is sharing is that in his weakness (and ours) God can show His real strength. (2 Cor. 12:9)

Paul then explains the the means to seeing and undersanding truth- the truth about God- is not in introspection or scholarship but in revelation. Our sinful minds would have never discovered the life saving truth of the gospel, but the Spirit Himself will reveal it to us: *"We do, however, speak a message of wisdom among the mature, but not the wisdom of this age or of the rulers of this age, who are coming to nothing. No, we declare God's wisdom, a mystery that has been hidden and that God destined for our glory before time began. None of the rulers of this age understood it, for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory. However, as it is written:*

"What no eye has seen,
what no ear has heard,
and what no human mind has conceived"--
the things God has prepared for those who love him—
these are the things God has revealed to us by his Spirit." (1 Cor. 2:6-10a)

The Spirit of God is active- it "searches" us and "teaches" us the deep things of God, which we would never have known apart from Him: *"The Spirit searches all things, even the deep things of God. For who knows a person's thoughts except their own spirit within them? In the same way no one knows the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God. What we have received is not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, so that we may understand what God has freely given us. This is what we speak, not in words taught us by human wisdom but in words taught by the Spirit, explaining spiritual realities with Spirit-taught words. The person without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God but considers them foolishness, and cannot understand them because they are discerned only through the Spirit. The person with the Spirit makes judgments about all things, but such a person is not subject to merely human judgments, for,*

"Who has known the mind of the Lord
so as to instruct him?"
But we have the mind of Christ." (1 Cor. 2:10b-16).
We have a precious treasure God has shared with us- the very mind of Christ!



http://www.todayschristianwoman.com/articles/2013/september/1-corinthians-29.html

Psalm 119:1-48 August 21, 2014 1 Corinthians 3

The Law- the Shema (Deut 6:4) directs us to meditate upon it "day and night". And so this majestic acrostic psalm does just that. The longest psalm (117 is the shortest) is structured in eight verse segments, each starting with a consecutive letter in the Hebrew alphabet. Thus we have a total of 176 verses, comprising 22 sets of eight verses, one for each of the 22 letters. The psalm begins with a meditation on the Law that mirrors that in Psalm 1:

"Blessed are those whose ways are blameless,
who walk according to the law of the Lord.
Blessed are those who keep his statutes
and seek him with all their heart—
they do no wrong
but follow his ways.
You have laid down precepts
that are to be fully obeyed." (Psalm 119:1-4)

This is an excellent parallel to Psalm 1:

"Blessed is the one
who does not walk in step with the wicked
or stand in the way that sinners take
or sit in the company of mockers,
but whose delight is in the law of the Lord,

and who meditates on his law day and night." (Psalm 1:1-2)
In both cases the "one" or "those" who walk according to the Law, or have "delight" in the Law are "blessed'- happy and full of the joy of the Lord!

The psalmist then utters an expression of hope- that he is following and internalizing God's Laws, as he has been instructed to. He is hopeful that he is in compliance both in the letter and spirit of the Law. It is interesting to note how many different synonyms are used in this psalm for the word "law". So far we have see "statutes" (verse 2); and precepts (verse 4)- there are many more!:
"Oh, that my ways were steadfast
in obeying your decrees!
Then I would not be put to shame
when I consider all your commands.
I will praise you with an upright heart
as I learn your righteous laws.
I will obey your decrees;
do not utterly forsake me." (Psalm 119:5-8)

Then the psalmist asks for a wonderful thing from God- that God's law be "hidden in his heart". In Jeremiah we see some of the same desire, this time as God promises to Jeremiah that there are days coming when a new covenant will be established, not based on words written on stone tablets, but on the hearts of His people:
"This is the covenant I will make with the people of Israel
after that time," declares the Lord.
"I will put my law in their minds
and write it on their hearts.
I will be their God,
and they will be my people." (Jer. 31:33)

The psalmist asks God to so inspire and challenge him to immersion in the Law, that it be an intergral part of his life:
"How can a young person stay on the path of purity?
By living according to your word.
I seek you with all my heart;
do not let me stray from your commands.
I have hidden your word in my heart
that I might not sin against you.
Praise be to you, Lord;
teach me your decrees." (Psalm 119:9-12)

The psalmist considers "purity"- here in the context of a young person (with hormones raging!), but a consideration of persons of every age and gender. Jesus refers to this later in the Semon on the Mount (Matthew 5:8) as "pure of heart"- meaning having a single minded desire to please God. The psalmist is looking at "purity" here more in the sense of moral purity- a "result" more than an "attitude", although these two cannot be truly separated! The way to purity, says the psalmist, is by knowledge of and adherence to God's laws—they reinforce a moral construct

that clearly separates the obedient from the disobedient, the moral from the immoral, and the pure from the impure. This moral structure in the universe is a truth often rejected by "modern" persons, but its truth is not in any way dependent on their beliefs.

The psalmist then unashamedly and openly asks God for His goodness, and that his life be a blessed one. He expects to find out "wonderful things" in God's Law:

"Be good to your servant while I live,
that I may obey your word.
Open my eyes that I may see
wonderful things in your law.
I am a stranger on earth;
do not hide your commands from me.
My soul is consumed with longing
for your laws at all times." (Psalm 119:17-20)

Certainly the psalmist is not so naïve as to suppose that there are not those who reject God's Laws, who lead lives of disobedience, greed and lust for power, money or fame. The psalmist notes that God "rebukes" those who are in this lifestyle:

"You rebuke the arrogant, who are accursed,
those who stray from your commands.
Remove from me their scorn and contempt,
for I keep your statutes.
Though rulers sit together and slander me,
your servant will meditate on your decrees.
Your statutes are my delight;
they are my counselors." (Psalm 119:21-24)

Things do not always go well with those who are righteous- as we all know "bad things" happen to "good people" (a subject worthy of another journal!). Even when things are well we sometimes weary of "doing good". The Scriptures encourage us to reach out for God's strength in times like these "Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up." (Gal. 6:9).

"I am laid low in the dust;
preserve my life according to your word.
I gave an account of my ways and you answered me;
teach me your decrees.
Cause me to understand the way of your precepts,
that I may meditate on your wonderful deeds.
My soul is weary with sorrow;
strengthen me according to your word." (Psalm 119:25-28)

The psalmist pleads that God would not be preoccupied with “worthless things”, instead to feed upon the Living Word:

“Turn my eyes away from worthless things;
preserve my life according to your word.
Fulfill your promise to your servant,
so that you may be feared.
Take away the disgrace I dread,
for your laws are good.
How I long for your precepts!
In your righteousness preserve my life.” (Psalm 119:37-40)

We then see the theme of salvation- a theme that God introduced early in his paln for mankind- starting as early as Eden. God’s plan for salvation was not completely revealed at this time, but the psalmist does understand that God does- and will- save His people:

“May your unfailing love come to me, Lord,
your salvation, according to your promise;
then I can answer anyone who taunts me,
for I trust in your word.
Never take your word of truth from my mouth,
for I have put my hope in your laws.
I will always obey your law,
for ever and ever.” (Psalm 119:41-44)

1 Corinthians 3

I’ll never forget it- I was registering for Explo 72 in Dallas, an evangelistic conference held in Dallas by Campus Crusade for Christ. The registration lines were long, the demands of the conference attendees seemingly endless, and some of the staff doing registration became weary and less than cheerful as they slogged on. I remember a quote from some of the “plastic Christians” whose forced smiles and faked happiness were their hallmark- “Those folks are CARNAL Christians” (Not like us, of course- we are ALWAYS happy and ready to follow God’s directions and assignments- we NEVER complain). What a temptation it is to “fake it” sometimes. We don’t FEEL like being happy or even optimistic, and yet we pretend and “act” like we are- because of a misplaced sense of guilt that we are really not “feeling it.” God is never impressed with this or any other legalistic self-righteousness- he is only concerned with who we really are- not that we are hypocrites (the word “hypocrite” comes from “acting”!).

Paul urges us to “grow up” and be mature in the gospel- not “perfect” in every action. We are to strive for the perfection of intent and motive- God will see and realize the “purity” of our hearts- often better than we do!:

“Brothers and sisters, I could not address you as people who live by the Spirit but as people who are still worldly—mere infants in Christ. I gave you milk, not solid food,

for you were not yet ready for it. Indeed, you are still not ready. You are still worldly. For since there is jealousy and quarreling among you, are you not worldly?" (1 Cor 3:1-3)

We are allowed to take "credt" for what we do, but always must realize that it is God who gives the increase. All of us have roles to play, but they should be plated in humility!
"What, after all, is Apollos? And what is Paul? Only servants, through whom you came to believe—as the Lord has assigned to each his task. I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God has been making it grow. So neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but only God, who makes things grow. The one who plants and the one who waters have one purpose, and they will each be rewarded according to their own labor. For we are co-workers in God's service; you are God's field, God's building." (1 Cor. 3:5-9)

Just as Jesus is the Cornerstone (Acts 4:11, Psalm 118:22) He is also the true foundation of everything that is built that has lasting value! *"By the grace God has given me, I laid a foundation as a wise builder, and someone else is building on it. But each one should build with care. For no one can lay any foundation other than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ. If anyone builds on this foundation using gold, silver, costly stones, wood, hay or straw, their work will be shown for what it is, because the Day will bring it to light. It will be revealed with fire, and the fire will test the quality of each person's work. If what has been built survives, the builder will receive a reward. If it is burned up, the builder will suffer loss but yet will be saved—even though only as one escaping through the flames."* (1 Cor. 3:10-15)

Then Paul points out one of the fallacies of Gnosticism- that the soul is the only reality and the body if "impure" and of the earth and activities of the body have no real consequence spiritually. He cleary states that the Spirit literally dwells in (or "indwells") the body: *"Don't you know that you yourselves are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in your midst? If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy that person; for God's temple is sacred, and you together are that temple."* (1 Cor. 3:16-17)

In one of the great paradoxes of Scripture, we must become "foolish" before we can become "wise". What I believe this means is that we must give up trying to know what the "answer" or the "solution" or the "right way or path" is and finally just let God be God- and go to Him for guidance and wisdom: *"Do not deceive yourselves. If any of you think you are wise by the standards of this age, you should become "fools" so that you may become wise. For the wisdom of this world is foolishness in God's sight. As it is written: "He catches the wise in their craftiness"; and again, "The Lord knows that the thoughts of the wise are futile." So then, no more boasting about human leaders! All things are yours, whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas or the world or life or death or the present or the future—all are yours, and you are of Christ, and Christ is of God."* (1 Cor. 3:18-23)

Psalm 119:49-104 August 22, 2014 1 Corinthians 4

Hope in the midst of suffering…this is our experience when we fully trust God! The psalmist celebrates this reality and gives thanks to his God for such provision:

"Remember your word to your servant,
for you have given me hope.
My comfort in my suffering is this:
Your promise preserves my life.
The arrogant mock me unmercifully,
but I do not turn from your law.
I remember, Lord, your ancient laws,
and I find comfort in them." (Psalm 119:49-52)

God's promises are the solid rock that gives us hope- we have learned that He alone is trustworthy. Even when we are mocked by unbelievers, we will not turn from God and His Law because we have learned through experience that He can be truste to sustain, bless and protect us. This is our true comfort "at the end of the day"! The psalmist then "indignant" at the scoffing and disobedience of unbelievers- he truly cares about the Honor of God's Name. God does not need us to protect His honor, but He welcomes us to experience the joy and satisfaction from holding onto Him above all, and treasuring the Name above all names!:

"Indignation grips me because of the wicked,
who have forsaken your law.
Your decrees are the theme of my song
wherever I lodge.
In the night, Lord, I remember your name,
that I may keep your law.
This has been my practice:
I obey your precepts." (Psalm 119:53-56)

As Joshua (Josh 24:15) so clearly stated "as for me and my house, we will obey the Lord" The psalmist pledges here to "obey your precepts"- precpts being another of the many synonyms used in this long poem to represent God's Law. The psalmist reflects on the many benefits of knowing and loving God- He is our portion:

"You are my portion, Lord;
I have promised to obey your words.
I have sought your face with all my heart;
be gracious to me according to your promise." (Psalm 119:57-58)

He is good and does good:

"You are good, and what you do is good;
teach me your decrees." (Psalm 119:68)

Your Law is precious to me above all else- reminiscent of Jesus' story of the pearl of great price (Matthew 13:45-46) -and I acknowledge you as my Creator, the source of the uniqueness of my very being:

"The law from your mouth is more precious to me
than thousands of pieces of silver and gold.
Your hands made me and formed me;
give me understanding to learn your commands." (Psalm 119:72-73)

Your salvation is a precious goal that I long for daily, it is the answer that I need for true comfort and joy in the presence of my Creator, affirmed and loved:

"My soul faints with longing for your salvation,
but I have put my hope in your word.
My eyes fail, looking for your promise;
I say, "When will you comfort me?"
Though I am like a wineskin in the smoke,
I do not forget your decrees.
How long must your servant wait?
When will you punish my persecutors?" (Psalm 119:81-84)

Your Word- your Law -is lifegiving and eternal, holding authority over all the created earth:

"Your word, Lord, is eternal;
it stands firm in the heavens.
Your faithfulness continues through all generations;
you established the earth, and it endures.
Your laws endure to this day,
for all things serve you.
If your law had not been my delight,
I would have perished in my affliction".(Psalm 119:89-92)

And-figuratively- your Law even "tastes good". I won't dignify the response of the jokester among us (the one that lives in my head sometimes) and ask if it is also "less filling" (Profound apologies to the Budweiser brewing company and their wonderful commercials):

"How sweet are your words to my taste,
sweeter than honey to my mouth!
I gain understanding from your precepts;
therefore I hate every wrong path." (Psalm 119:103-104)

1 Corinthians 4

Treat me like a servant- this is what Paul is asking of those who are in the church- the family of faith- in Corinth. He is not ashamed of anything he has done, and has a clear conscience. Paul points out though, that having a clear conscience is not identical to being innocent. God will judge, in the end, and we should always leave that function to God: *"This, then, is how you ought to regard us: as servants of Christ and as those entrusted with the mysteries God has revealed. Now it is required that those who have been given a trust must prove faithful. I care very little if I am judged by you or by any human court; indeed, I do not even judge myself. My conscience is clear, but that does not make me innocent. It is the Lord who judges me."* (1 Cor. 4:1-4)

What usually happened in any group of believers is that some will want to go "beyond" that which has been written or revealed by God's Spirit. They seek the

“extra knowledge” so they can feel superior to those around them who do not have such “exalted truth” Paul addresses this in his pastoral letter to Timothy (2 Timothy 4:3): *“For the time will come when people will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear.”* Paul fully understood that the desire to be “special” or “above others” was very strong!: *“Now, brothers and sisters, I have applied these things to myself and Apollos for your benefit, so that you may learn from us the meaning of the saying, “Do not go beyond what is written.” Then you will not be puffed up in being a follower of one of us over against the other.”* (1 Cor. 4:6)

Paul then shames these believers by reminding them of what they already have. This is a message so appropriate to believers in the US, who have (by the world’s standards) incredible material riches, convenience and comfort. There is no place for “entitlement” in God’s kingdom. We muct all be willing to endure hardship for the Kingdom:*”Already you have all you want! Already you have become rich! You have begun to reign—and that without us! How I wish that you really had begun to reign so that we also might reign with you! For it seems to me that God has put us apostles on display at the end of the procession, like those condemned to die in the arena. We have been made a spectacle to the whole universe, to angels as well as to human beings. We are fools for Christ, but you are so wise in Christ! We are weak, but you are strong! You are honored, we are dishonored! To this very hour we go hungry and thirsty, we are in rags, we are brutally treated, we are homeless. We work hard with our own hands. When we are cursed, we bless; when we are persecuted, we endure it; when we are slandered, we answer kindly. We have become the scum of the earth, the garbage of the world—right up to this moment.”* (1 Cor. 4:8-13)

Paul, though, always wanted to “claim in love” more than “defeat in shame” those fellow workers in the church wherever he went. He would be quick to catch their attention, and then in loving wise counsel instruct and enlighten them in the things of the Spirit: *I am writing this not to shame you but to warn you as my dear children. Even if you had ten thousand guardians in Christ, you do not have many fathers, for in Christ Jesus I became your father through the gospel. Therefore I urge you to imitate me. For this reason I have sent to you Timothy, my son whom I love, who is faithful in the Lord. He will remind you of my way of life in Christ Jesus, which agrees with what I teach everywhere in every church.”* (1 Cor. 4:14-17) Since Paul

could not always be physically present in this (or any) church, he left- and commended- Timothy to the fellowship in Corinth.

The next set of verses are the context for my "life verse" (1 Cor. 4:20). I was reading my New International New Testament in a parking lot in Decatur, Ga, waiting for my date with my first wife. As I was reading through this section of 1 Corinthians 4, I was arrested, energized and almost literally "knocked out" with the power of this verse. At this point in my walk, I had tired of "endless words and no action"- and was ready for a Word from God. He showed me so clearly that the Kingdom was truly and eternally about power- power that I knew I lacked in my life. This started me on a journey- which I am still on- to explore, internalize, receive and ACT decisively for the Kingdom- knowing and trusting that the "power" was there for the asking! Nothing in my walk has been the same sense. Glory to the gracious God who paiently teaches and communicates such life changing truths! Paul's words are these: *"Some of you have become arrogant, as if I were not coming to you. But I will come to you very soon, if the Lord is willing, and then I will find out not only how these arrogant people are talking, but what power they have. For the kingdom of God is not a matter of talk but of power. What do you prefer? Shall I come to you with a rod of discipline, or shall I come in love and with a gentle spirit?"* (1 Cor. 4:18-21)

Psalm 119:105-176 August 23, 2014 1 Cornithians 5

God's Word- His Law- a source of enlightenment that literally "lights our pathway". Amy Grant has popularized a contemporary worship song that is a paraphrase of psalm 119:105 -

"Your word is a lamp for my feet,
a light on my path."

How wonderful it is to see God's Word in new settings- it is a constant source of inspiration to those who love the worship of our wonderful God!

The psalmist reminds God that he has sufferd much (as if God needed to be reminded) but that he, the psalmist, would be steadfast in love and devotion:

"I have suffered much;
preserve my life, Lord, according to your word.
Accept, Lord, the willing praise of my mouth,
and teach me your laws." (Psalm 119:107-108)

Even though those who are evil and reject God try to undermine the faith of the psalmist, he is resolute in following God's Law:

"Your statutes are my heritage forever;
they are the joy of my heart.
My heart is set on keeping your decrees

to the very end." (Psalm 119:111-112)

There have always been "double minded" people- those who do not simply follow God and wholly devote themselves to Him. These are described in James 1:8 "Such a person is double-minded and unstable in all they do."

The psalmist then claims to have lived a righteous life, doing what was right and just. I often wonder about those making this clain- perhaps because I cannot truthfully make it for myself. The closes I come to God- the more intimate my relationship- the more my own sins are apparent (and ugly) to me. Jesus dealt with one who made this claim- the "rich, young, ruler" described in the synoptic Gospels. ""All these I have kept," the young man said. "What do I still lack?" (Matthew 19:20) The young man had just been asked about what he thought righteousness was- and Jesus referred him to the Law and commandments. How could this young man claim to have "kept" these Laws- certainly not perfectly! The gospel writers report that Jesus "loved" this young man, and answered his question this way- give up that which prevents you from truly loving God – your idols. In this case it was money- and all that money brought to this young man's life. I am impressed that he asked the question…"what do I still lack ?. I am saddened that he left without fully committing his life to the Lord:

"I have done what is righteous and just;
do not leave me to my oppressors.
Ensure your servant's well-being;
do not let the arrogant oppress me.
My eyes fail, looking for your salvation,
looking for your righteous promise.
Deal with your servant according to your love
and teach me your decrees." (Psalm 119:121-124)

The psalmist has been "deep" into the Word of God through prayer and meditation and in practice, and has concluded that God's law is "wonderful". This motivates him to agree with and follow God's leading through the gift of the Law:

"Your statutes are wonderful;
therefore I obey them.
The unfolding of your words gives light;
it gives understanding to the simple.
I open my mouth and pant,
longing for your commands.
Turn to me and have mercy on me,
as you always do to those who love your name." (Psalm 119:129-132)

God is always delighted to "hear from us" regardless of our situation- here the psalmist describes to God the times that he has "cried out" to God in his anxiety and need, hoping for and depending on an answer from his Father:

"I call with all my heart; answer me, Lord,
and I will obey your decrees.
I call out to you; save me
and I will keep your statutes.

I rise before dawn and cry for help;
I have put my hope in your word.
My eyes stay open through the watches of the night,
that I may meditate on your promises." (Psalm 119:145-148)
Sometime I myself have called out to God "through the watches of the night" and I have always found Him ready and willing to be a Presence and comfort to me.

Once again we see the consideration of "salvation". Only through keeping the Law perfectly could anyone be saved…the great blessing for us is that One did live such a life and sacrificed His sinless life for us! The psalmist contrasts the prospects of salvation of the wicked with the righteous, but in my view misses the point of the Law- it is to illustrate, illuminate and diagnose our sinful state. Paul said it this way:" Therefore no one will be declared righteous in God's sight by the works of the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of our sin." (Romans 3:20). The paslmist declares:
"Salvation is far from the wicked,
for they do not seek out your decrees.
Your compassion, Lord, is great;
preserve my life according to your laws.
Many are the foes who persecute me,
but I have not turned from your statutes.
I look on the faithless with loathing,
for they do not obey your word.
See how I love your precepts;
preserve my life, Lord, in accordance with your love.
All your words are true;
all your righteous laws are eternal." (Psalm 119:155-160)

The unfortunate truth is that salvation is "far" from us all without the saving and cleansing blood of the Lamb! Yet the psalmist still "waits for" (and perhaps expects) salvation through "following the Law":
"I wait for your salvation, Lord,
and I follow your commands.
I obey your statutes,
for I love them greatly.
I obey your precepts and your statutes,
for all my ways are known to you." (Psalm 119:166-168)

The psalmist ends this long acrostic poem with a plea for God to hear ("may my supplication come before you") and be merciful to him:
"May my cry come before you, Lord;
give me understanding according to your word.
May my supplication come before you;
deliver me according to your promise.
May my lips overflow with praise,

for you teach me your decrees.
May my tongue sing of your word,
for all your commands are righteous.
May your hand be ready to help me,
for I have chosen your precepts.
I long for your salvation, Lord,
and your law gives me delight.
Let me live that I may praise you,
and may your laws sustain me.
I have strayed like a lost sheep.
Seek your servant,
for I have not forgotten your commands." (Psalm 119:169-176)
We are all truly "lost sheep" that are totally dependent on our Loving Shepherd for every good thing.

1 Corinthians 5
Real people make up a real church and encounter real problems. Paul can scarcely believe that there is sexual immorality in the family of believers, and that the practices he has heard of exceed the immorality of "unbelievers". How is this possible? The answer is simple- saved people can (and do) sin against God. The remaking of our selves is not for most of us an instantaneous process. God will, and desires very much to, make us "new creatures" (2 Cor. 5:17). We must participate in the process and allow God to give us the power to have victories each and every day. Paul writes: *"It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you, and of a kind that even pagans do not tolerate: A man is sleeping with his father's wife. And you are proud! Shouldn't you rather have gone into mourning and have put out of your fellowship the man who has been doing this? For my part, even though I am not physically present, I am with you in spirit. As one who is present with you in this way, I have already passed judgment in the name of our Lord Jesus on the one who has been doing this. So when you are assembled and I am with you in spirit, and the power of our Lord Jesus is present, hand this man over to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, so that his spirit may be saved on the day of the Lord."* (1 Cor. 5:1-5). The solution offered here may sem "extreme" to some- hand this "man" (person) over to Satan- literally cast him out of the fellowship- so that God can begin to convict and correct. Would that we had the courage to do so in this day in the church!

Paul then deals with a serious problem within the chuch -"boasting". Some who are self righteous and judgmental (we sometimes call them Pharasaic) and who view themselves as spiritually "superior" can ruin the church with endless strife and ultimately divisions. Satan has a great victor when the church is fractionated this way! Paul remids the church at Coprinth that this "leaven" of boasting and self-righteousness must be replaced with a new "leaven" for the ggod of the body: *"Your boasting is not good. Don't you know that a little yeast leavens the whole batch of dough? Get rid of the old yeast, so that you may be a new unleavened batch—as you really are. For Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed. Therefore let us keep the Festival, not with the old bread leavened with malice and wickedness, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth."* (1 Cor. 5:6-8)

The apostle goes even further and provides detail as to how the church should properly handle those who are in the body but persist in sin: *"I wrote to you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral people— not at all meaning the people of this world who are immoral, or the greedy and swindlers, or idolaters. In that case you would have to leave this world. But now I am writing to you that you must not associate with anyone who claims to be a brother or sister but is sexually immoral or greedy, an idolater or slanderer, a drunkard or swindler. Do not even eat with such people."* (1 Cor. 5:9-11)

The authority to judge those "outside" rests solely with God- but we have an important role within the church to maintain order and purity among the believers: *"What business is it of mine to judge those outside the church? Are you not to judge those inside? 13 God will judge those outside. "Expel the wicked person from among you."* (1 Cor 5:12-13). This is certainly a responsibility that should be undertaken with all seriousness, humility, and lots of prayer for discernment. If we are to believe the parable of the wheat and tares (Matthew 13:24-30), Jesus is instructing us to "leave these alone" until judgment comes- not our judgment but the Lord's. This is another of those amazingly difficult but critically important judgment calls. May God have nercy on us as we follow His guidance and direction. Please see (http://www.gotquestions.org/parable-wheat-tares.html). One idea that has helped me is that this parable is referring to the "world"- not the "church"- so we are still to be careful to exclude those who are "unrepentant sinners" among us. There is no easy path to accomplish this- we again must rely on Him for judgment and discernment!

http://www.care2.com/c2c/groups/disc.html?gpp=165&pst=1212254

Psalm 120-123 August 24, 2014 1 Cornithians 6

Psalm 120 is a “song of ascents”. According to Wikipedia (the definitive source of all information online) these 15 psalms are: “…sung by the worshippers as they ascended the road to Jerusalem to attend the three pilgrim festivals (Deuteronomy 16:16) or by the kohanim (priests) as they ascended the fifteen steps to minister at the Temple in Jerusalem.” (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Song_of_Ascents) They all begin with the Hebrew “ascription Shir Hama'aloth (Hebrew: שִׁיר הַמַּעֲלוֹת, meaning "Song of Ascents").

This particular psalm is a cry for help for one who is under attack by a person (or persons) with “deceitful lips”. This person (or persons) is bent on pursuing war, while the psalmist is fervently wishing for peace:

“I call on the Lord in my distress,
and he answers me.
Save me, Lord,
from lying lips
and from deceitful tongues.” (Psalm 120:1-2)

Peace is a precious goal, worthy of pursuit, yet it is scoffed at by so many:

”Too long have I lived
among those who hate peace.
I am for peace;
but when I speak, they are for war.” (Psalm 120:6-7)

I generally love and appreciate the New Internation version translation of the Scripture. It is the version I study- and the version quoted here in this journal. Occasionally, and especially in the Psalms, the beauty of the poetry- and perhaps the familiarity of the “sound”- of the King James (authorized) version is superior to my ear and heart. Here is the NIV translation of Psalm 121:1-2:

“I lift up my eyes to the mountains—
where does my help come from?
My help comes from the Lord,
the Maker of heaven and earth.”

The contrast with the KJV is striking:

“I will lift up mine eyes unto the hills, from whence cometh my help.
My help cometh from the Lord, which made heaven and earth.” (Psalm 121:1-2 KJV)

This psalm, also a “song of ascents”, has been put in several “new” musical settings, one of which I have had the privilege to perform as a choral work “He Watching Over Israel” by Mendellsohn from the oratorio “Elijah” (see the video at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O-Uh4BX3pW8):

“He will not let your foot slip—
he who watches over you will not slumber;
indeed, he who watches over Israel
will neither slumber nor sleep.” (Psalm 121:3-4)

Our God is intensely personal, he watches not only over Israel, but over each one of us- over you and me. The psalmist rejoices at this wonderful divine love and protection:

“The Lord watches over you—
the Lord is your shade at your right hand;
the sun will not harm you by day,

nor the moon by night.
The Lord will keep you from all harm—
he will watch over your life;
the Lord will watch over your coming and going
both now and forevermore." (Psalm 121:5-8)

Psalm 122, another "song of ascents" is one I know better, and remember more fondly, as the KJV, especially the first several verses:

"I rejoiced with those who said to me,
"Let us go to the house of the Lord."
Our feet are standing
in your gates, Jerusalem.
Jerusalem is built like a city
that is closely compacted together.
That is where the tribes go up—
the tribes of the Lord—
to praise the name of the Lord
according to the statute given to Israel." (Psalm 122:1-4 NIV)

Contrast this translation to the majestic poetry in the KJV:

"I was glad when they said unto me, Let us go into the house of the Lord.
Our feet shall stand within thy gates, O Jerusalem.
Jerusalem is builded as a city that is compact together:
Whither the tribes go up, the tribes of the Lord, unto the testimony of Israel, to give thanks unto the name of the Lord." (Psalm 122:1-4 KJV)

In fact, when I read verse 3 in the NIV, I totally misunderstood the word "compacted"- I interpreted that as "physically" compacted, rather that "having a compact (agreement)! This probably says more about me than the translation! It's always helpful- and sometimes essential, to read the Scripture in more than one translation. For sheer reading pleasure and enjoyment (and sometimes devotion), I enjoy the Message translation, but I don't "study" it because it is a paraphrase.

We then come to a phrase that has come to mean something "more" in our modern setting- "Pray for the Peace of Israel". This does not mean that we should be in blanket agreement with the political state of Israel, but that we should fervently pray for God's own people to be protected, sheltered from harm, and to enjoy the fruits of true peace. The psalmist says:

"Pray for the peace of Jerusalem:
"May those who love you be secure.
May there be peace within your walls
and security within your citadels."
For the sake of my family and friends,
I will say, "Peace be within you."
For the sake of the house of the Lord our God,
I will seek your prosperity." (Psalm 122:6-9)

Psalm 123, also a "song of ascents", is a poetic expression of "hope under duress". The psalmist identifies himself with those in bondage, who look to their master for comfort and help. They cannot help themselves, and desperately need the love and assistance of their God. And so are we- helpless to help ourselves and dependent

on God for “every good thing”, but at “just the right time” Christ died for all of us (Romans 5:6):

“I lift up my eyes to you,
to you who sit enthroned in heaven.
As the eyes of slaves look to the hand of their master,
as the eyes of a female slave look to the hand of her mistress,
so our eyes look to the Lord our God,
till he shows us his mercy.
Have mercy on us, Lord, have mercy on us,
for we have endured no end of contempt.
We have endured no end
of ridicule from the arrogant,
of contempt from the proud.” (Psalm 123:1-4)

1 Corinthians 6

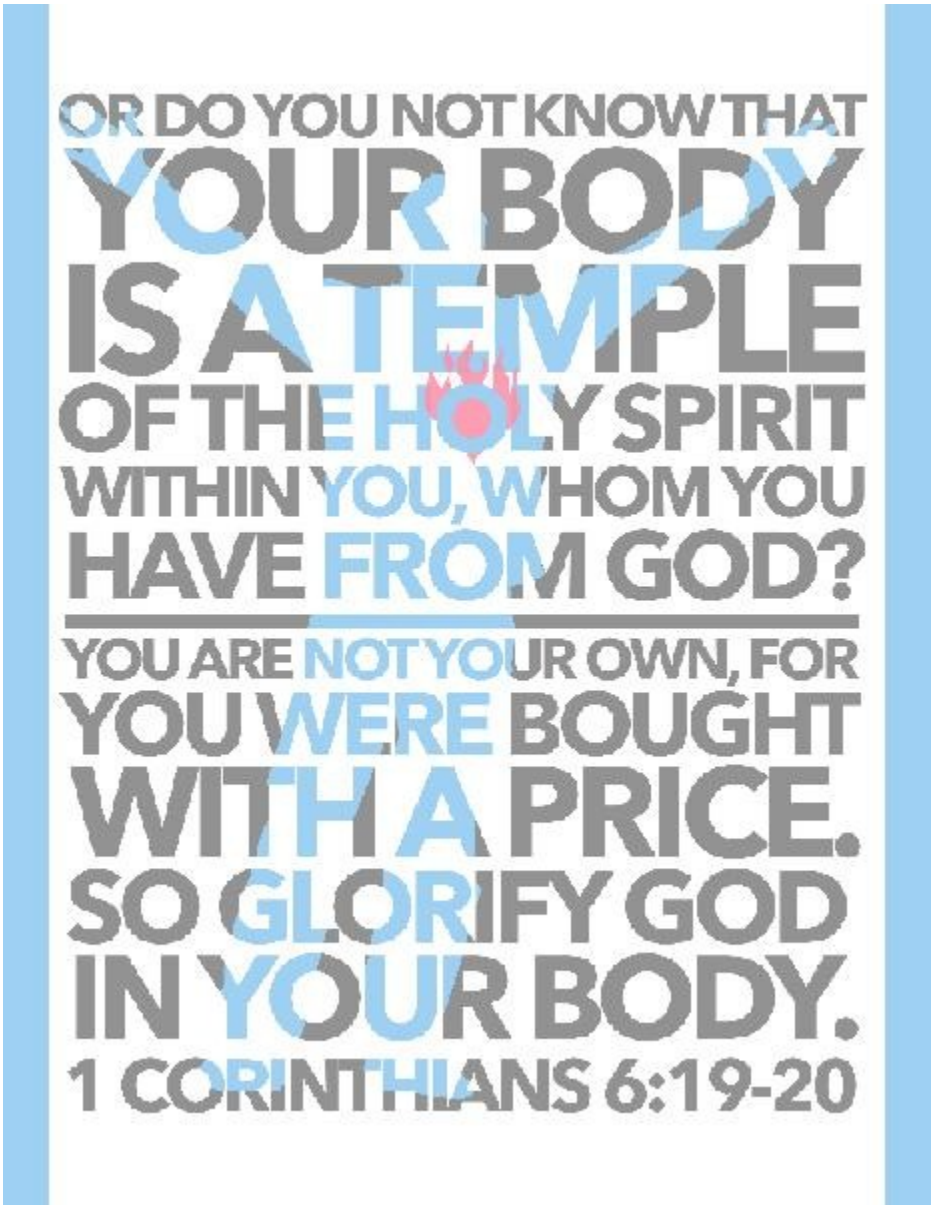
“Ninety five percent of the lawyers are giving the other five percent a bad name”- so goes the “humorous” saying (some cynics make the percentages higher 99 or 99.9% of the lawyers!). Paul is rightfully distressed whrn believers resort to “man’s justice” instead of consulting the Lord of the universe to settle disputes among them. Paul writes: *“If any of you has a dispute with another, do you dare to take it before the ungodly for judgment instead of before the Lord’s people? Or do you not know that the Lord’s people will judge the world? And if you are to judge the world, are you not competent to judge trivial cases? Do you not know that we will judge angels? How much more the things of this life! Therefore, if you have disputes about such matters, do you ask for a ruling from those whose way of life is scorned in the church? I say this to shame you. Is it possible that there is nobody among you wise enough to judge a dispute between believers? But instead, one brother takes another to court—and this in front of unbelievers! The very fact that you have lawsuits among you means you have been completely defeated already. Why not rather be wronged? Why not rather be cheated? Instead, you yourselves cheat and do wrong, and you do this to your brothers and sisters.”* (1 Cor. 6:1-8)

Then Paul makes a long list of those who “will not inherit” the Kingdom of God. One again, the Scripture is crystal clear about homosexual sex- it is listed among the sins that disqualify one for the kingdom. Certainly Paul does not stop there, he reminds the Corinthians that they were once “on that list” and have repented (turned away), asked forgiveness, and received pardon for all these “sins and lifestyles”. I must remember that in some cases this is a process- I am not completely “cured” of my tendency to sin, but I am asking God daily for strength and singleness of purpose to deal with my sins and sin nature- the goal is victory! Here is Paul’s commentary:

“Or do you not know that wrongdoers will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: Neither the sexually immoral nor idolaters nor adulterers nor men who have sex with men nor thieves nor the greedy nor drunkards nor slanderers nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. And that is what some of you were. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God.” (1 Cor. 6:9-11) Lest anyone try to “wiggle off the hook” from verse 6, the translator’s footnote reads “1 Corinthians 6:9 The

words “men who have sex with men” translate two Greek words that refer to the passive and active participants in homosexual acts.”

Paul then describes some of the “reasons” or realities of those who have extramarital sex, and points as an example to sex with a prostitute. This was, and is, a fairly common practice. The Corinthians were surrounded by a pagan culture, just as we are today. Paul writes to the church: *“You say, “Food for the stomach and the stomach for food, and God will destroy them both.” The body, however, is not meant for sexual immorality but for the Lord, and the Lord for the body. By his power God raised the Lord from the dead, and he will raise us also. Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ himself? Shall I then take the members of Christ and unite them with a prostitute? Never! Do you not know that he who unites himself with a prostitute is one with her in body? For it is said, “The two will become one flesh.” But whoever is united with the Lord is one with him in spirit. Flee from sexual immorality. All other sins a person commits are outside the body, but whoever sins sexually, sins against their own body. Do you not know that your bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; you were bought at a price. Therefore honor God with your bodies.”* (1 Cor. 6:13-20)



Several things are worthy of note here: 1) the phrase “you say” (1 Cor. 6:13) is a reflection of how pervasive our “culture” is on our thinking. We who claim the Name of Jesus should be especially sensitive to the dulling of our awareness of sin. There will always be “competing voices” to the teaching of Scripture. We must be careful not to let these “voices” drown out the voice, urging and Word of God; 2) we can effectively “flee” from sexual (or any) immorality (1 Cor 6:18). James writes *“resist the devil, and he will flee from you.”* (James 4:7) Sometimes resisting involves physically (or emotionally) removing ourselves from temptation. We must constantly ask God to help us be on our guard against temptation. The Enemy knows us far to well for any false confidence on our part!

Psalm 124-127 August 25, 2014 1 Corinthians 7:1-24

Four more songs of ascent greet me today as I journal and expectantly listen to God to speak. The fourth, Psalm 127, is attributed to Solomon. Psalm 124 has a simple theme- "If God had not intervened, we would have been overcome and perhaps even destroyed". The tone of this psalm is positive- it focuses on the rejoicing of a group of believers who were spared the agony of the enemy's intentions by the grace and providence of God. We can always find victory if we look:

"If the Lord had not been on our side—
let Israel say—
if the Lord had not been on our side
when people attacked us,
they would have swallowed us alive
when their anger flared against us;
the flood would have engulfed us,
the torrent would have swept over us,
the raging waters
would have swept us away." (Psalm 124:1-5)

The the psalmist prasies the "God who delivers":

Praise be to the Lord,
who has not let us be torn by their teeth.
We have escaped like a bird
from the fowler's snare;
the snare has been broken,
and we have escaped.
Our help is in the name of the Lord,
the Maker of heaven and earth." (Psalm 124:6-8). Just as in Psalm 91, God provides a way of escape and protects us from the "snares" of the enemy.

Psalm 125 is a simple somg of trust- the psalmist contrasts those who trust in God- who depend on Him daily, with those who reject or ignore him and do evil in His sight. God restores, protects and supplies every good thing to those who love Him, but allows those who do not to depart from His presence:

"Those who trust in the Lord are like Mount Zion,
which cannot be shaken but endures forever.
As the mountains surround Jerusalem,
so the Lord surrounds his people
both now and forevermore.
The scepter of the wicked will not remain
over the land allotted to the righteous,
for then the righteous might use
their hands to do evil.
Lord, do good to those who are good,
to those who are upright in heart.
But those who turn to crooked ways

the Lord will banish with the evildoers.
Peace be on Israel." (Psalm 125:1-5)

Many times the people of Israel had to learn hard lessons- when they departed from God's umbrella of protection and grace and went their own way, God sometimes allowed their enemies to overrun them, rule them, and make their lives miserable lives of captivity and despair. Many times this was a "wake up" call to God's people, and they would cry out to Him. Many times, in His mercy and grace, he would restore them. This psalm is one of remembering the times that God graciously provided restoration, and "restored the fortunes" of His people:
"Restore our fortunes, Lord,
like streams in the Negev.
Those who sow with tears
will reap with songs of joy.
Those who go out weeping,
carrying seed to sow,
will return with songs of joy,
carrying sheaves with them." (Psalm 127:4-6).
The tone and message of this psalm is similar to Psalm 130, in which we see this verse: "For his anger lasts only a moment, but his favor lasts a lifetime; weeping may stay for the night, but rejoicing comes in the morning." (Psalm 130:5) The result of God's dealing with His people leads to joy- perhaps not experienced or realized in the moment, but inevitable as God restores His people He imparts unspeakable joy- His own people know Him and delight in His presence, actions, and character!

The last psalm considered today takes me to a praking lot in Brownsville, Texas. Our mission team was headed to Mexico, and we were near the border ready to cross and begin work building the block walls of a church. I was asked to give the devotional for the morning, and these were the verses I chose for the occasion:
"Unless the Lord builds the house,
the builders labor in vain.
Unless the Lord watches over the city,
the guards stand watch in vain.
In vain you rise early
and stay up late,
toiling for food to eat—
for he grants sleep to those he loves." (Psalm 128:1-2)
We were about to "build a house" – a house for God's people to worship, and we would certainly be putting in long hours- up early and staying at the work site late (but with a break in the early afternoon- siesta is a real working concept in the blazing heat of Mexico!). Unless we fully relied on Him, and let Him guide our work- it was all simply an exercise in futility. The glorious truth is that it was not- God gave us success- not only in raising four block walls- with spaces for windows and doors- but he allowed us to witness to the church we were serving that they were loved and cared for!

My mental and spiritual scene then shifts to Metamora, Illinois. My then father in law Robert Leroy Schroen often quoted this set of verses to me. He was a giant in the faith, truly in love with his Savior, and loved to memorize and quote the Scriptures to me. This was one of his favorites. He and my mother in law Esther had ten children, mainly because they believed that children were a gift from God:

"Children are a heritage from the Lord,
offspring a reward from him.
Like arrows in the hands of a warrior
are children born in one's youth.
Blessed is the man
whose quiver is full of them.
They will not be put to shame
when they contend with their opponents in court." (Psalm 128:3-5)

1 Corinthians 7:1-24

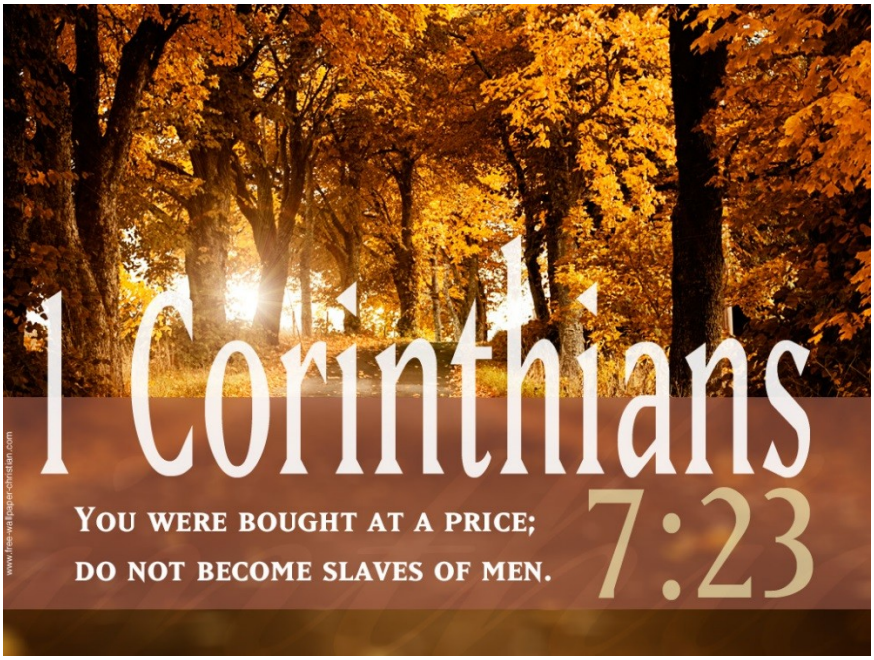
Some of the greatest misunderstandings and feelings of guilt have come from teachings about our sexual nature in the Scripture. The plan that God had was very simple- he created a man and a "helpmate", a woman, and told them to be fruitful and multiply. How simple is that? The picture becomes more complicated when two additional factors are considered: 1) lots more people (not just the two original folks) and 2) the entry of sin into the created world. The church in Corinth was surrounded by all kinds of "moralities" and a health dose of immorality (by any standard). Paul is trying to restore the church to the original pattern that God decreed for us- a man (a husband) should love a woman (his wife) and stay in a fathful, loving relationship. There is certainly nothing "wrong" or "evil" about sex- it is a great gift from God, but one that must be kept in its proper boundaries. Just as a river is "good" and "does good"- providing water and a habitat it becomes "bad" when it overflows its banks. The good is good in a defined location- or in this case- a relationship. Sex becomes sinful when it is taken outside the boundaries that God has lovingly provided to us- for our won good and spiritual growth.

Paul condemns the sin of sexual immorality in clear language: *"Now for the matters you wrote about: "It is good for a man not to have sexual relations with a woman." But since sexual immorality is occurring, each man should have sexual relations with his own wife, and each woman with her own husband. The husband should fulfill his marital duty to his wife, and likewise the wife to her husband. The wife does not have authority over her own body but yields it to her husband. In the same way, the husband does not have authority over his own body but yields it to his wife. Do not deprive each other except perhaps by mutual consent and for a time, so that you may devote yourselves to prayer. Then come together again so that Satan will not tempt you because of your lack of self-control."* (1 Cor. 7:1-5)

There has been considerable discussion among scholars as to whether Paul was married. It is clear that he is not married at the time of writing this letter: *"I wish that all of you were as I am. But each of you has your own gift from God; one has this gift, another has that."* (1 Cor. 7:7) Paul's gift of celibacy had a purpose- it gave him the freedom to go wherever the Spirit led him and freed him from the considerations of caring for a family. He was a Pharisee (Phil. 3:5) and it follows logically that he was- at least for a time- married. Marriage was the norm for Pharisees, and it is likely that Paul was a widower (http://www.dennyburk.com/was-the-apostle-paul-married/). Some "higher critics" imply that Paul had an unhappy marriage, and therefore was overly critical of those who married, looking at marriage as a "concession" to their otherwise uncontrollable lust. I cannot personally believe that a man so loved by God and so exquisitely trained (and experienced) in the Scriptures could arrive at this place emotionally. Paul knew God's plan- my conclusion is that he was simply being practical about the place of marriage in his own ministry.

Another controversial area that is touched on in this part of Paul's letter is the so called "Scriptural" basis for divorce. (Please see http://www.gotquestions.org/grounds-for-divorce.html). Jesus stated clearly that the only "grounds" for divorce was gross unfaithfulness and immorality by one of the parties. Paul adds what seems to be a second "justification"- desertion by an unbeliever. What Paul is espousing though, is not a true divorce but a separation: *"But if the unbeliever leaves, let it be so. The brother or the sister is not bound in such circumstances; God has called us to live in peace. How do you know, wife, whether you will save your husband? Or, how do you know, husband, whether you will save your wife?"* (1 Cor, 17:15-16). A lot hinges on the interprepation of the phrase "let it be so" (verse 15)

The remainder of this part of the letter (verses 17-24) is a consideration and a prescription to all of us who are believers to "stay where we are". If we are unmarried, to stay unmarried, if married to remain so. And if a slave, to seek freedom if offered, but to realize that the slave is now "truly free" in the Lord and the one who was "free" is now a "slave to the Lord": *"Nevertheless, each person should live as a believer in whatever situation the Lord has assigned to them, just as God has called them. This is the rule I lay down in all the churches. Was a man already circumcised when he was called? He should not become uncircumcised. Was a man uncircumcised when he was called? He should not be circumcised. Circumcision is nothing and uncircumcision is nothing. Keeping God's commands is what counts. Each person should remain in the situation they were in when God called them. Were you a slave when you were called? Don't let it trouble you—although if you can gain your freedom, do so. For the one who was a slave when called to faith in the Lord is the Lord's freed person; similarly, the one who was free when called is Christ's slave. You were bought at a price; do not become slaves of human beings. Brothers and sisters, each person, as responsible to God, should remain in the siituation they were in when God called them."* (1 Cor. 7:17-24).



http://wallpaper4god.com/en/background_1-corinthians-723-men-are-not-slaves/

Paul is teaching us that what really matters is our new relationship with God when we were "called" and responded in faith. Circumcision or uncircumcision are not issues, the main truth is that we belong to God and are not "slaves to human beings" (verse 23).

Psalm 128-131 August 26, 2014 1 Corinthians 7:25-40

Four more songs of ascents- the last one- Psalm 131-attributed to David. Psalm 128 reflects on the benefits and blessings of a life lived in haromony and relationship with God:

"Blessed are all who fear the Lord,
who walk in obedience to him.
You will eat the fruit of your labor;
blessings and prosperity will be yours.
Your wife will be like a fruitful vine
within your house;
your children will be like olive shoots
around your table." (Psalm 128:1-3).

Some of the most treasured blessings of God's people were plentiful and abundant crops and the blssing of children. The ability of a woman to bear children was directly correlated in thei mnds with the degree of blessing that she- and her family- enjoyed.

Prosperity- and long life_ were the trasures greatly to be desired, and they were the fruits of a loving relationship with God:

"May you live to see your children's children—
peace be on Israel." (Psalm 128:6)

Israel was constantly surrounded by enemies- and still is. The psalmist cries out to God that the wicked have oppressed him and caused him harm, but he delight and

promise is the power of the mighty hand of the Lord, who can (and di) remove the oppressor from him and retore him to his former place of peace and freedom. They have not gained victory over him:

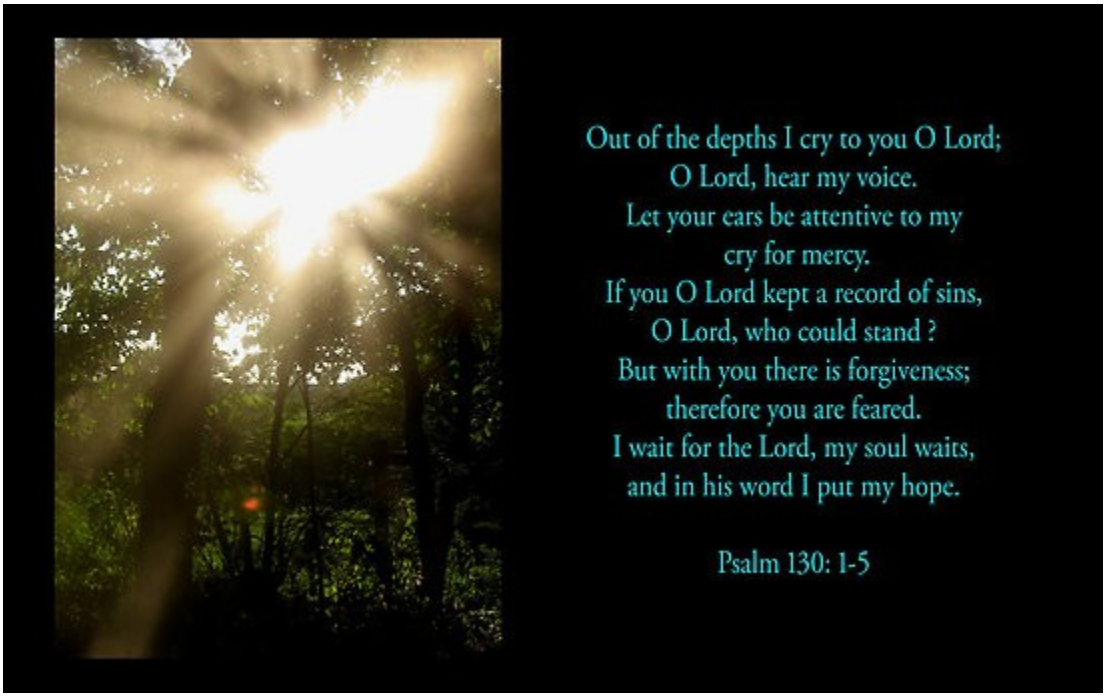
"They have greatly oppressed me from my youth,"
let Israel say;
"they have greatly oppressed me from my youth,
but they have not gained the victory over me.
Plowmen have plowed my back
and made their furrows long.
But the Lord is righteous;
he has cut me free from the cords of the wicked."
May all who hate Zion
be turned back in shame.
May they be like grass on the roof,
which withers before it can grow;
a reaper cannot fill his hands with it,
nor one who gathers fill his arms.
May those who pass by not say to them,
"The blessing of the Lord be on you;
we bless you in the name of the Lord." (Psalm 129:1-8)

Just as in Psalm 30, the psalmist cries out to God. He is not in a "pit" as in Psalm 30, but he is in the depths. The salmist realizes that without God he would have no hope of redemption and salvation. The psalmist knows, though, that God forgives and saves. He saves not only the individual, but the nation of His people as well:

"Out of the depths I cry to you, Lord;
Lord, hear my voice.
Let your ears be attentive
to my cry for mercy.
If you, Lord, kept a record of sins,
Lord, who could stand?
But with you there is forgiveness,
so that we can, with reverence, serve you." (Psalm 130:1-4).

If we only put our hope and faith in His unfailing love, then we can re-establsh the loving relationship we have as a people with Him, and live in the covenant He graciously established with us:

"Israel, put your hope in the Lord,
for with the Lord is unfailing love
and with him is full redemption.
He himself will redeem Israel
from all their sins." (Psalm 130:7-8)



http://www.redbubble.com/people/oldmanted74/works/4317338-psalm-130-1-5

The last psalm of ascents bears the unmistakeable stamp of the passion and emotions of David. He was never ashamed to be honest with God, expressing his emotions and fears (and triumphs). David's constant experience was the loving protection of his God. He expresses it beautifully and simply here:

"My heart is not proud, Lord,
my eyes are not haughty;
I do not concern myself with great matters
or things too wonderful for me.
But I have calmed and quieted myself,
I am like a weaned child with its mother;
like a weaned child I am content.
Israel, put your hope in the Lord
both now and forevermore." (Psalm 131:1-3)

1 Corinthians 7:25-40

Paul was willing- and able- to offer his best advice to the church. Often he spoke to those in the churches as a concerned parent, who was sharing the best advice they could give out of their life experience. Her Paul is speaking about those unmarried within the church. As discussed previously, the evidence in Scripture is that Paul was unmarried during his ministry and wiritng, the tradition of the Pharisees was that he would have been married at one time. Most scholars conclude that Paul was a widower.

He speaks carefully, admitting that he has not derived his advice and commentary directly from Scripture, but believes that the Spirit of God has given him these

directions and counsel to the unmarried: *"Now about virgins: I have no command from the Lord, but I give a judgment as one who by the Lord's mercy is trustworthy. Because of the present crisis, I think that it is good for a man to remain as he is. Are you pledged to a woman? Do not seek to be released. Are you free from such a commitment? Do not look for a wife. But if you do marry, you have not sinned; and if a virgin marries, she has not sinned. But those who marry will face many troubles in this life, and I want to spare you this."* (1 Cor. 7:25-28). His main point seems to be this- time is short, and we should spend our days and our efforts pleasing God: *"What I mean, brothers and sisters, is that the time is short. From now on those who have wives should live as if they do not; those who mourn, as if they did not; those who are happy, as if they were not; those who buy something, as if it were not theirs to keep; those who use the things of the world, as if not engrossed in them. For this world in its present form is passing away."* (1 Cor. 7:29-31).
Paul believed, as did many in the church at that time, that the Lord's second coming was imminent- there were literally only moths or years left until the world in its "present form" (verse 31) was going to pass away. Regardless of when the Lord comes, we also should live every day as if it were our last on the earth, striving to never miss an opportunity to show love and kindness, testify to the truth God has give us, or to lead someone to a saving relationship with Jesus.

Paul correctly points out that it is the "duty" of a husband to please his wife, and a wife to please their husband. One of my favorite saings is that I "wake up every morning and try to think of ways I can please my lovely wife". This has brought great joy and happiness to us both! The issue is devotion to the Lord: *"I would like you to be free from concern. An unmarried man is concerned about the Lord's affairs—how he can please the Lord. But a married man is concerned about the affairs of this world—how he can please his wife— and his interests are divided. An unmarried woman or virgin is concerned about the Lord's affairs: Her aim is to be devoted to the Lord in both body and spirit. But a married woman is concerned about the affairs of this world—how she can please her husband. I am saying this for your own good, not to restrict you, but that you may live in a right way in undivided devotion to the Lord."* (1 Cor. 7:33-35)

The apostle's final advice is that if a woman becomes widowed, she is no longer bound to the one she married but is free to please the Lord, because she ultimately belongs to Him. Paul advises that this life of devotion is a superior way of living: *"A woman is bound to her husband as long as he lives. But if her husband dies, she is free to marry anyone she wishes, but he must belong to the Lord. In my judgment, she is happier if she stays as she is—and I think that I too have the Spirit of God."* (1 Cor. 7:39-40)

Psalm 132-135 August 27, 2014 1 Corninthians 8

Psalm 132 is a song of ascents about David. He was determined to buikd a proper house for God, in place of the tent that had traveled with God's people through the wilderness (2 Samuel 7:1-16), but Natthan the prophet received a vision fro God that David was not to build the Temple- that task would fall to David's son Solomon. The psalm pays tribute to David's good intention:
"Lord, remember David

and all his self-denial.
He swore an oath to the Lord,
he made a vow to the Mighty One of Jacob:
"I will not enter my house
or go to my bed,
I will allow no sleep to my eyes
or slumber to my eyelids,
till I find a place for the Lord,
a dwelling for the Mighty One of Jacob." (Psalm 132:1-5)

The real focus of the psalm is on the line of David, that God swore would always be on the throne (2 Samuel 7). This is understandable- the psalmist wants God's assurance of the line of descent and all the attendant security and blessing that it brings. God, however, made the promise conditional on the faithfulness of His people- some scholars believe the godlessness of Jehoichin in the 500 BC era nullified the covenant:" A widely spread traditional Christian interpretation relates the non-continuation of the main Davidic line from Solomon as related the godlessness of Jehoiachin in the early 500s BC, where Jeremiah cursed the main branch of the Solomonic line, saying that no descendant of "[Je]Coniah" would ever again reign on the throne of Israel (Jer. 22:30) (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Davidic_line). Many conservative Christian scholars point to Jesus as the ultimate fulfilment of this promise- His line is an eternal one. The psalmist repeats God's promise, as if to remind Him:

"The Lord swore an oath to David,
a sure oath he will not revoke:
"One of your own descendants
I will place on your throne.
If your sons keep my covenant
and the statutes I teach them,
then their sons will sit
on your throne for ever and ever." (Psalm 132:11-12)

Here we come to the heart of the matter- God has established Zion- the symbolic nation of Israel, and will prosper her people:

"For the Lord has chosen Zion,
he has desired it for his dwelling, saying,
"This is my resting place for ever and ever;
here I will sit enthroned, for I have desired it.
I will bless her with abundant provisions;
her poor I will satisfy with food.
I will clothe her priests with salvation,
and her faithful people will ever sing for joy.
"Here I will make a horn[b] grow for David

and set up a lamp for my anointed one.
I will clothe his enemies with shame,
but his head will be adorned with a radiant crown." (Psalm 132:13-18)

Psalm 133 celebrates the unity of God's people when they live, work, worship and praise God together. It is a beautiful poem of the blending of the souls and spirits of God's people at their best:
"How good and pleasant it is
when God's people live together in unity!
It is like precious oil poured on the head,
running down on the beard,
running down on Aaron's beard,
down on the collar of his robe.
It is as if the dew of Hermon
were falling on Mount Zion.
For there the Lord bestows his blessing,
even life forevermore." (Psalm 133:1-3)

Psalm 134 in its brief simplicity praises those who serve God in the Temple, and in the broader and more general sense in worship:
"Praise the Lord, all you servants of the Lord
who minister by night in the house of the Lord.
Lift up your hands in the sanctuary
and praise the Lord.
May the Lord bless you from Zion,
he who is the Maker of heaven and earth." (Psalm 134:1-3)

The praise of God is one of the highest acts that we as a people can accomplish. The Hebrew for "praise the Lord" is "*Hallelu Yah"* from which we derive the English "Hallelujah". Psalm 135 lists the aspects and acts of God that we praise in our worship together- it is a kind of "spiritual checklist" that we can follow when in worship and praise. The psalmist fist notes the creative power of God:
"I know that the Lord is great,
that our Lord is greater than all gods.
The Lord does whatever pleases him,
in the heavens and on the earth,
in the seas and all their depths.
He makes clouds rise from the ends of the earth;
he sends lightning with the rain
and brings out the wind from his storehouses." (Psalm 135:5-7)
God delivered His people from slavery in Egypt, and was powerful in battle and overcame the enemies of His people:
"He struck down the firstborn of Egypt,
the firstborn of people and animals.
He sent his signs and wonders into your midst, Egypt,
against Pharaoh and all his servants.

He struck down many nations
and killed mighty kings—
Sihon king of the Amorites,
Og king of Bashan,
and all the kings of Canaan—
and he gave their land as an inheritance,
an inheritance to his people Israel." (Psalm 135:8-12)
God's Name endures forever- He has compassion on His people:
"Your name, Lord, endures forever,
your renown, Lord, through all generations.
For the Lord will vindicate his people
and have compassion on his servants." (Psalm 135:13-14)
God is the True, living God- not like the lifeless idols of the pagan peoles that surrounded Israel:
"The idols of the nations are silver and gold,
made by human hands.
They have mouths, but cannot speak,
eyes, but cannot see.
They have ears, but cannot hear,
nor is there breath in their mouths.
Those who make them will be like them,
and so will all who trust in them." (Psalm 135:15-18)
What is the proper response to all these glorious facts and truth? Praise!- praise to the Lord of the universe, the one True and Living God:
"All you Israelites, praise the Lord;
house of Aaron, praise the Lord;
house of Levi, praise the Lord;
you who fear him, praise the Lord.
Praise be to the Lord from Zion,
to him who dwells in Jerusalem.
Praise the Lord." (Psalm 135:19-21)

1 Corinthians 8

Jesus teaches us that we are not to be a "cause for stumbling" (Matthew 18:5-7), here referring to being an impediment to the faith of little children. This principle is expressed in 1 Corinthians 8, but here the focus is the "stumbling" of adults who have a "weak conscience" (1 Cor. 8:10,12). The specific issue is "meat sacrificed to idols", an issue that we would hardly call "relevant" today. We could look at the general subject of idolatry, which is still a chief and besetting sin of so many believers, but instead let us look at the issue of generally being a "stumbling block"

to anyone who does not believe the specifics of the faith exactly as we do. The greatest measure of love in this conext is consideration and sensitivity to the beliefs of those who disagree, responding to them in love, not rejection or judgment: *"Now about food sacrificed to idols: We know that "We all possess knowledge." But knowledge puffs up while love builds up. Those who think they know something do not yet know as they ought to know. But whoever loves God is known by God."* (1 Cor. 8:1-3)

In verse 4-8, Paul expands on this "prescription" for love, tolerance and sensitivity. He assures his readers that he understands that the idols are not true "gods", but that we must realize that some do feel this way. Our superior knowledge does not justify an arrogant and "superior" attitude: *"So then, about eating food sacrificed to idols: We know that "An idol is nothing at all in the world" and that "There is no God but one." For even if there are so-called gods, whether in heaven or on earth (as indeed there are many "gods" and many "lords"), yet for us there is but one God, the Father, from whom all things came and for whom we live; and there is but one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom all things came and through whom we live. But not everyone possesses this knowledge. Some people are still so accustomed to idols that when they eat sacrificial food they think of it as having been sacrificed to a god, and since their conscience is weak, it is defiled. But food does not bring us near to God; we are no worse if we do not eat, and no better if we do."* (1 Cor. 8:4-8)

The apostle assures us that we have the "right" to eat this meat (after all, it was "sacrificed" to a piece of rock or wood!), but we should never exercise this "right" if it causes a weaker brother or sister to stumple. The love and unity of the church, and the unbroken fellowship of believers, is far more important than our "rights": *"Be careful, however, that the exercise of your rights does not become a stumbling block to the weak. For if someone with a weak conscience sees you, with all your knowledge, eating in an idol's temple, won't that person be emboldened to eat what is sacrificed to idols? So this weak brother or sister, for whom Christ died, is destroyed by your knowledge. When you sin against them in this way and wound their weak conscience, you sin against Christ. Therefore, if what I eat causes my brother or sister to fall into sin, I will never eat meat again, so that I will not cause them to fall."* (1 Cor. 8:9-13). As Jesus reminded us (Matthew 18:6), it would be better to have a "millstone" wrapped around your neck and drown in the sea than to be a cause of stumbling!

Psalm 136-138 August 28, 2014 1 Corinthians 9

Psalm 136 is one of many that have been reset, reinvented and reenvisioned into a modern musical setting. Michael W. Smith's epic praise album "Worship" includes a new setting for this psalm entitled "Forever"

Give thanks to the Lord, Our God and King
His love endures forever
For He is good, He is above all things
His love endures forever
Sing praise, sing praise

With a mighty hand and outstretched arm

His love endures forever
For the life that's been reborn
His love endures forever
Sing praise, sing praise
Sing praise, sing praise

CHORUS:
Forever God is faithful
Forever God is strong
Forever God is with us
Forever and ever, forever

The psalm expresses the same wonderful and beautiful truths:
"Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good.
His love endures forever.
Give thanks to the God of gods.
His love endures forever.
Give thanks to the Lord of lords:
His love endures forever.
to him who alone does great wonders,
His love endures forever." (Psalm 136:1-4)
A little child (or a new believer) might ask "How long is forever?" The answer is simple- forever is a long time- in fact, most of us believe that we go outside of time when we enter His presence after death- and we finally are not limited, rushed or dominated by the clock. Prasie to the One who is forever!

The psalmist then remembers and recites some of the catalog of "mighty deeds" that God has accomplished for His people, and concludes with praise:
"He remembered us in our low estate
His love endures forever.
and freed us from our enemies.
His love endures forever.
He gives food to every creature.
His love endures forever.
Give thanks to the God of heaven.
His love endures forever." (Psalm 136:23-26)

Psalm 137 is a remembrance of the tragic exile of God's people to Babylon. This occurred when Nebuchadnezzar overcame the walled city of Jerusalem and sent captives into exile, about 582 BC (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Babylonian_captivity). The people that were exiled were "strangers in a strange land", and the psalmist laments that they were not able to sing the "songs" that had once meant so much to them while in their homeland. Instaed of bringing comfort, the songs were a painful reminder of how far thay had moved from God's blessings and protection.

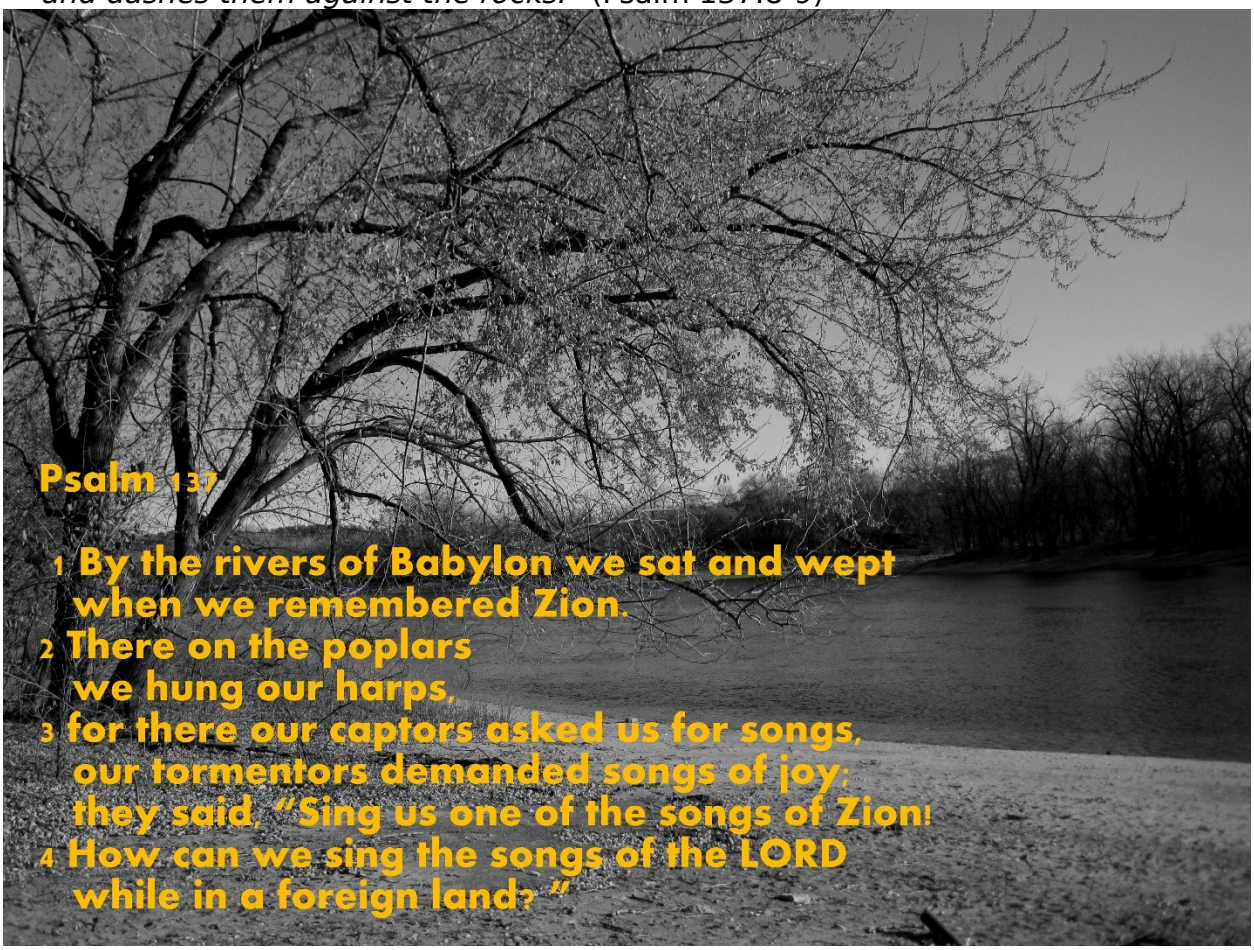
"By the rivers of Babylon we sat and wept
when we remembered Zion.
There on the poplars
we hung our harps,
for there our captors asked us for songs,

our tormentors demanded songs of joy;
they said, "Sing us one of the songs of Zion!"
How can we sing the songs of the Lord
while in a foreign land?
If I forget you, Jerusalem,
may my right hand forget its skill.
May my tongue cling to the roof of my mouth
if I do not remember you,
if I do not consider Jerusalem
my highest joy." (Psalm 137:1-6)

How awful it must have been for the captors to demands that the exiles sing a "song of Zion"!

Then we encounter still another example of the raw emotion of God's people, and in particular the psalmist, who asks God for revenge against his captors. The last verse is one hat many readers have a hard time imagining to be a part of Scripture- it stands as a testimony that the Scripture reflects- but does not approve of or bless- the real raw emotions of the prople of God:

"Daughter Babylon, doomed to destruction,
happy is the one who repays you
according to what you have done to us.
9 Happy is the one who seizes your infants
and dashes them against the rocks." (Psalm 137:8-9)



Psalm 138 is attributed in the marginal (translator's) notes to be from David. The psalm certainly reflects the great gifts of music and poetry we have seen in other Davidic psalms. The psalmist is praisng God "before the other "gods", and by his praise is calling on God to demonstrate His superiority to the idols/gods that have been created by men. He hopes that raising God "with his whole heart"- as David often did- would bring a strong and clear response from the God he loved and trusted his entire life:

"I will praise you, Lord, with all my heart;
before the "gods" I will sing your praise.
I will bow down toward your holy temple
and will praise your name
for your unfailing love and your faithfulness,
for you have so exalted your solemn decree
that it surpasses your fame.
When I called, you answered me;
you greatly emboldened me.
May all the kings of the earth praise you, Lord,
when they hear what you have decreed.
May they sing of the ways of the Lord,
for the glory of the Lord is great." (Psalm 138:1-5)

David- the psalmist- then reflect on the personal and intimate nature of his relationship with the Lord, noting that God, although mighty and exalted, is interested and involved in the affairs of His children:

"Though the Lord is exalted, he looks kindly on the lowly;
though lofty, he sees them from afar.
Though I walk in the midst of trouble,
you preserve my life.
You stretch out your hand against the anger of my foes;
with your right hand you save me.
The Lord will vindicate me;
your love, Lord, endures forever—
do not abandon the works of your hands." (Psalm 138:6-8)

1 Corinthians 9

Paul must have gotten frustrated with the "flocks" he tender- the people of the churches he planted and ministered to. Some were prone to challenge his very authority and calling. Nothing was clearer to Paul than the fact that God had uniquely and powerfully called and equipped him for just that work, yet there were always those who challenged him. He expresses his frustratons with the Corinthian church: *"Am I not free? Am I not an apostle? Have I not seen Jesus our Lord? Are you not the result of my work in the Lord? Even though I may not be an apostle to others, surely I am to you! For you are the seal of my apostleship in the Lord. This is my defense to those who sit in judgment on me. Don't we have the right to food and drink. Don't we have the right to take a believing wife along with us, as do the other apostles and the Lord's brothers and Cephas? Or is it only I and Barnabas who lack the right to not work for a living? Who serves as a soldier at his own expense? Who plants a vineyard and does not eat its grapes? Who tends a flock and does not drink the milk? Do I say this merely on human authority? Doesn't the Law say the same thing? For it is written in the Law of Moses: "Do not muzzle an ox*

while it is treading out the grain." Is it about oxen that God is concerned? Surely he says this for us, doesn't he? Yes, this was written for us, because whoever plows and threshes should be able to do so in the hope of sharing in the harvest. If we have sown spiritual seed among you, is it too much if we reap a material harvest from you? If others have this right of support from you, shouldn't we have it all the more? But we did not use this right. On the contrary, we put up with anything rather than hinder the gospel of Christ." (1 Cor. 9:1-12)

In light of the comments and controversy surrounding Paul's marital state during his ministry, it is important to note that he stated his right to take a "believing wife" along with him in ministry (verse 5). His conclusion after expressing much frustration is very telling- he did all of this "challenge meeting" in such a way that the Gospel would not be "hindered" (verse 12)

Paul did not exercise his "rights"- the simple compensation for his efforts- again because he wanted to preach the gospel without the hindrance of "making a living" at preaching. His custom, according to tradition, was to work as a tent maker during his ministry (Acts 18:3), often in the company of other believer/trademen so that he was "free" to preach whatever God laid on his heart, without consideration of "offending some" and therefore interrupting his compensation. This, I believe, is a good model for ministry today. Only when a person's "living wage" is not tied to his (or her) preaching is the preacher free to say "Thus says the Lord" regardless of its offending someone- especially a "rich giver"! Paul says it this way: *"But I have not used any of these rights. And I am not writing this in the hope that you will do such things for me, for I would rather die than allow anyone to deprive me of this boast. For when I preach the gospel, I cannot boast, since I am compelled to preach. Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel! If I preach voluntarily, I have a reward; if not voluntarily, I am simply discharging the trust committed to me. What then is my reward? Just this: that in preaching the gospel I may offer it free of charge, and so not make full use of my rights as a preacher of the gospel."* (1 Cor. 9:15-18)

Paul then makes a statement that has been misunderstood by many believers. He comments that he has become "like his audience" to win them over to the Gospel. His words are: *"To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win the Jews. To those under the law I became like one under the law (though I myself am not under the law), so as to win those under the law. To those not having the law I became like one not having the law (though I am not free from God's law but am under Christ's law), so as to win those not having the law. To the weak I became weak, to win the weak. I have become all things to all people so that by all possible means I might save some."* (1 Cor. 9:20-22). The most common misunderstanding is that Paul became a "chameleon" or hypocrite and compromised his beliefs to win followers for Jesus. Wat I believe he is saying is that he used his "points of connetion" that already existed to the benefit of the evangelization of those he came in contact with. Paul is not being "hypocritical" when he says he is a "Jew"- he really WAS a Jew- just one who knew the Messiah! He really was "weak" at some points- as we all are- and used the times of weakness to connect with the expeiences of the "weak".

Paul then concludes this section of his letter by reminding us of the need for self discipline. Just as an athlete trains hard for a crown/prize that does not last, we also must rain fro the crown that is eternal. We must do everything we can to make sure

we are “qualified” to win the prize: *“Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one gets the prize? Run in such a way as to get the prize. Everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training. They do it to get a crown that will not last, but we do it to get a crown that will last forever. Therefore I do not run like someone running aimlessly; I do not fight like a boxer beating the air. No, I strike a blow to my body and make it my slave so that after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified for the prize.”* (1 Cor. 9:24-27)

Psalm 139-141 August 29, 2014 1 Corinthians 10:1-13

Where can we hide from God? How can we “keep” something away from Him and out of His consciousness? The fact that is both frightening and encouraging, a souce of misery and despair as well as a source of joy and peace is that we cannot… hide, keep our thoughts and feelings away from Him- for He is the omnipresent- ever present- God. One of Hig greatest promises to us is that He will be with us (Psalm 46:7; 1 Chron. 22:18). For an exposition of this topic, please see the sermon by Spurgeon (http://www.spurgeon.org/sermons/2471.htm). The God who is WITH us eternally also KNOWS us, as the psalmist (David) attests:

“You have searched me, Lord,
and you know me.
2 You know when I sit and when I rise;
you perceive my thoughts from afar.
3 You discern my going out and my lying down;
you are familiar with all my ways.
4 Before a word is on my tongue
you, Lord, know it completely.
5 You hem me in behind and before,
and you lay your hand upon me.
6 Such knowledge is too wonderful for me,
too lofty for me to attain.
7 Where can I go from your Spirit?
Where can I flee from your presence?
8 If I go up to the heavens, you are there;
if I make my bed in the depths, you are there.” (Psalm 139:1-8)

Those who would argue that life begins for an infant only when it takes a first breath should pay heed to this Scriptural message- God “knit us together” before our birth- and by implication knew us an loved us from the moment of conception:

“For you created my inmost being;
you knit me together in my mother’s womb.
14 I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made;

your works are wonderful,
I know that full well.
15 My frame was not hidden from you
when I was made in the secret place,
when I was woven together in the depths of the earth.
16 Your eyes saw my unformed body;
all the days ordained for me were written in your book
before one of them came to be.
17 How precious to me are your thoughts God!
How vast is the sum of them!
18 Were I to count them,
they would outnumber the grains of sand—
when I awake, I am still with you." (Psalm 139:13-18)

The psalm closes with two themes: 1) petition for God to punich the wicked- and not just "any" wicked- the ones that are causing David harm; 2) a please for God to examine the psalmist's heart to see if there is anything displeasing in it. This is an acknowledgement that we are less than objective in examining oour own hearts- we typically think we are in much better (or worse) condition spiritually than we actually are. Only God has the ability and wisdom to apprise us of our true spiritual condition:

If only you, God, would slay the wicked!
Away from me, you who are bloodthirsty!
20 They speak of you with evil intent;
your adversaries misuse your name.
21 Do I not hate those who hate you, Lord,
and abhor those who are in rebellion against you?
22 I have nothing but hatred for them;
I count them my enemies." (Psalm 139:19-220

And then comes the plea for God to truly examine our heart:

23 Search me, God, and know my heart;
test me and know my anxious thoughts.
24 See if there is any offensive way in me,
and lead me in the way everlasting." (Psalm 139:23-24)

Once again David is crying out to the Lord for mercy and [protection. The great truth thatDavid knew was that God was not only available to Him, but that God was truly God and was a permanent and unchanging force fro good and correction of evil. David literally staked his life on this reality! That is how we truly learn spiritual truths, by literally risking our lives and well being and fully depending on God to be the unshakable and solid foundation and protector that He is:

"Rescue me, Lord, from evildoers;
protect me from the violent,
2 who devise evil plans in their hearts
and stir up war every day.
3 They make their tongues as sharp as a serpent's;
the poison of vipers is on their lips.[c]

4 Keep me safe, Lord, from the hands of the wicked;
protect me from the violent,
who devise ways to trip my feet.
5 The arrogant have hidden a snare for me;
they have spread out the cords of their net
and have set traps for me along my path.
6 I say to the Lord, "You are my God."
Hear, Lord, my cry for mercy.
7 Sovereign Lord, my strong deliverer,
you shield my head in the day of battle.
8 Do not grant the wicked their desires, Lord;
do not let their plans succeed." (Psalm 140:1-8).

David could say with great confidence "You are my God" (verse 6) and all that this foundational statement entails.

Since David was truly human, he asked God for vengeance and revenge against his enemies:

"Those who surround me proudly rear their heads;
may the mischief of their lips engulf them.
10 May burning coals fall on them;
may they be thrown into the fire,
into miry pits, never to rise.
11 May slanderers not be established in the land;
may disaster hunt down the violent." (Psalm 140:9-11).

The David prasies God "in advance" and claims victory over evil, and the evil ones, and justice for the poor. He is so confident in God's righteous actions that he claims results he has not yet seen:

"I know that the Lord secures justice for the poor
and upholds the cause of the needy.
13 Surely the righteous will praise your name,
and the upright will live in your presence." (Psalm 140:12-13)

David needed, as we do, to "guard his thoughts and heart" so that he would not enter into evil practices and wrong thinking. Satan is constantly looking for our weaknesses- he knows them even better than we do. We have the power to resist the Evil one, but we must do so constantly and deliberately. James teaches us (4:7) that we must "resist the devil" and that then he will flee from us. Part of our effective resistance is our constant prayer to God for strength and vigilance in this spiritual warfare:

"I call to you, Lord, come quickly to me;
hear me when I call to you.
2 May my prayer be set before you like incense;
may the lifting up of my hands be like the evening sacrifice.
3 Set a guard over my mouth, Lord;
keep watch over the door of my lips.
4 Do not let my heart be drawn to what is evil
so that I take part in wicked deeds

along with those who are evildoers;
do not let me eat their delicacies." (Psalm 141:1-4)
David is confident that the evil ones will be defeated by God:
"Their rulers will be thrown down from the cliffs,
and the wicked will learn that my words were well spoken.
7 They will say, "As one plows and breaks up the earth,
so our bones have been scattered at the mouth of the grave." (Psalm 141:6-7)

The psalmist then again asks God for shelter, refuge and protection- for which he will be in prayer with his eyes "fixed on the Lord" constantly. This is the source of David's protection and strength:
"But my eyes are fixed on you, Sovereign Lord;
in you I take refuge—do not give me over to death.
9 Keep me safe from the traps set by evildoers,
from the snares they have laid for me.
10 Let the wicked fall into their own nets,
while I pass by in safety." (Psalm 141:8-10)

1 Corinthians 10:1-13

One of Paul's most frequent methods of presentation of the trtuth of the gospel was to remind his listeners of what they already knew. In the case of the Jewish believers, he knew that they wer familiar with the Hebrew Scriptures, which have become the "Old Testament". The scriptures were the common reference point for Jewish believers, and contained truths that they were now able to view through the lens of the Risen Christ. Paul reminds the listeners in Corinth: *"For I do not want you to be ignorant of the fact, brothers and sisters, that our ancestors were all under the cloud and that they all passed through the sea. 2 They were all baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea. 3 They all ate the same spiritual food 4 and drank the same spiritual drink; for they drank from the spiritual rock that accompanied them, and that rock was Christ. 5 Nevertheless, God was not pleased with most of them; their bodies were scattered in the wilderness."* (1 Cor 10:1-5) Paul is referring to several things here that are worthy of our consideration: 1) the passing theough the Red/Reed Sea (Exodus 13:17-22; Heb. 11:29); 2) the cloud that led them by day through the desert wilderness (Exodus 13:21); 3) their "baptism into Moses" in the cloud and the sea; 4) the spiritual food "manna" which was a symbol of God's provision (Exodus 16); 5) drinking from the rock (Exodus 17, Numbers 20); and their "scattering in the wilderness" out of their lack of faith in God's provision of the promised Land (Numbers 13,14; Joshua 14:6-15; 15:13-19).

I must confess I had not remembered the verse about the people being "baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea" (verse 2). The commentary is helpful here

(http://biblehub.com/commentaries/1_corinthians/10-2.htm). My impression (and certainly not deep theology) is that baptism involves "going down into the water" as a type of Jesus' burial after the crucifixion- literally "dying with Him", and subsequently being joined to Him in a new and lasting way. The Hebrew people certainly saw a lot of water- especially as they escaped drowning- and were bound to Moses and his leadership through following him and God- here symbolized by the "cloud". The rejection of the Promised Land is perhaps one of the saddest examples of the lack of faith of God's people- despite the "good report" of Caled and Joshua, the people refused to take the land and instead were condemned to wander in the desert until the 'faithless" generation passed away- for forty years!

Paul hopes that by pointing out the examples of the sins and consequences of God's people in the wilderness that the church in Corinth will avoid similar errors and entrapments: *"Now these things occurred as examples to keep us from setting our hearts on evil things as they did. 7 Do not be idolaters, as some of them were; as it is written: "The people sat down to eat and drink and got up to indulge in revelry." 8 We should not commit sexual immorality, as some of them did—and in one day twenty-three thousand of them died. 9 We should not test Christ, as some of them did—and were killed by snakes. 10 And do not grumble, as some of them did—and were killed by the destroying angel."* (1 Cor. 10:6-10). The reference to the "revelry" is found in Exodus 32:6. The people had made an idol- a golden calf- and were ready to indulge themselves in a riotous celebration. Certainly they were tired and frustrated after their years of wandering. Surely Aaron had done a "good thing" by giving them a physical object to worship. But God was not, and is not, please when anything created is put into the category of uncreated- which He alone can occupy! The later rebellion of the people led to an infestation with venomous snakes, the cure for which was looking at a bronze image of a snake "lifted up". This is of course a type of the salvation of mankind when they consider Jesus "lifted up" (John 12:32).

Paul then follows these warnings with a key teaching on temptation. We can never "blame God" for bringing us temptation. We pray in the Lord's Prayer that He will "deliver us from temptation" but this does not imply that He led us there! I will never forget the afternoon my former wife informed me that the "Scriptures weren't true" and that she had been put into temptation that she could not resist. After I got over my stunned surprise, I reminded her that she herself had taught me that these very Scriptures were true! How sad it is when we "blame God" for troubles of our own making. Paul explains to the Corinthians: *"These things happened to them as examples and were written down as warnings for us, on whom the culmination of the ages has come. 12 So, if you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don't fall! 13 No temptation has overtaken you except what is common to mankind. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can endure it."* (1 Cor. 10:11-13)

Psalm 142-144 August 30, 2014 1 Corinthians 10:14-33

Trapped…hunted…marked for capture or killing….this was the life David led as he continued to flee from the pursuing Saul and his numerically superior forces. Our

marginal notes suggest this was the setting of Psalm 142. The psalm could be referring to either of two instances where David hid in a cave from Saul (1 Samuel 22 or 24). In either case David's life was in grave danger, and once again he cried out to God his protector and sustainer to help him in his dire plight. Once again, God was faithful and protected David, and in 1 Samule 24 even gave him the opportunity to eliminate his enemy Saul. David, being a righteous man, would not harm the "Lord's anointed". What a model of humility and obedience for us! The psalmist writes:

"I cry aloud to the Lord;
I lift up my voice to the Lord for mercy.
I pour out before him my complaint;
before him I tell my trouble.
When my spirit grows faint within me,
it is you who watch over my way.
In the path where I walk
people have hidden a snare for me.
Look and see, there is no one at my right hand;
no one is concerned for me.
I have no refuge;
no one cares for my life." (Psalm 142:1-4)

David asks for mercy and protection, but not just for his own sake. He asks God to spare his life so that he can praise God, and be an effective witness for Him to the people he will soon serve as king:

"Listen to my cry,
for I am in desperate need;
rescue me from those who pursue me,
for they are too strong for me.
Set me free from my prison,
that I may praise your name.
Then the righteous will gather about me
because of your goodness to me." (Psalm 142:6-7)

Sometimes we need help "now"! We just can't wait for God to help us, overcome an enemy, and obstacle, an illness, or a "besetting" sin. David felt this way as part of his human experience, and he shares his thoughts and feelings with us in this psalm:

"Lord, hear my prayer,
listen to my cry for mercy;
in your faithfulness and righteousness
come to my relief.
Do not bring your servant into judgment,
for no one living is righteous before you.
The enemy pursues me,

he crushes me to the ground;
he makes me dwell in the darkness
like those long dead.
So my spirit grows faint within me;
my heart within me is dismayed.
I remember the days of long ago;
I meditate on all your works
and consider what your hands have done.
I spread out my hands to you;
I thirst for you like a parched land." (Psalm 143:1-6)

It is important to notice that David is not deluded as to the "perfection" of God's people. He himself, and all believers, stumble, fall and sin. As David states in verse 2 "no one living is righteous before you". The language in verse 6 is also similar to the language in Psalm 42:1 *"As the deer pants for streams of water, so my soul pants for you, my God."* We have an unquenchable thirst for God, and for the Living Water that His Son provides (John 4:10; 7:37-39).

David cries out to God to teach him and to provide "level ground" for him- a stable place where he is free to love and serve his God and Creator:

"Teach me to do your will,
for you are my God;
may your good Spirit
lead me on level ground." (Psalm 143:10).

The purpose of this rescue, teaching and provision, again, is not for "us" but ultimately for the glory of God Himself:

"For your name's sake, Lord, preserve my life;
in your righteousness, bring me out of trouble.
In your unfailing love, silence my enemies;
destroy all my foes,
for I am your servant." (Psalm 143:11-12)

Our praise must always center on the personality, promises and character of our Precious God! When we start with praise, wonderful things then flow from the Spirit to our very souls and then out from us to glorify and praise His Name. David knew the power of praise:

"Praise be to the Lord my Rock,
who trains my hands for war,
my fingers for battle.
He is my loving God and my fortress,
my stronghold and my deliverer,
my shield, in whom I take refuge,
who subdues peoples under me." (Psalm 144:1-2)

The psalmist then reflects on the relative place of God and His creation- especially humankind. There are echoes of Psalm 8 in this passage:

Lord, what are human beings that you care for them,

mere mortals that you think of them?
They are like a breath;
their days are like a fleeting shadow." (Psalm 144:3-4)
Compare this to:
"When I consider your heavens,
the work of your fingers,
the moon and the stars,
which you have set in place,
what is mankind that you are mindful of them,
human beings that you care for them?
You have made them a little lower than the angels
and crowned them with glory and honor." (Psalm 8:3-5)
David, who knew well the value of musi and musical instruments in worship and praise, reflects on the "new song" he desires to sing to his God:
"I will sing a new song to you, my God;
on the ten-stringed lyre I will make music to you,
to the One who gives victory to kings,
who delivers his servant David." (Psalm 142:9-10)
David then anticipates the bounty and blssing God provides so generously to His people, the people who love Him and call on His Name:
"Then our sons in their youth
will be like well-nurtured plants,
and our daughters will be like pillars
carved to adorn a palace.
Our barns will be filled
with every kind of provision.
Our sheep will increase by thousands,
by tens of thousands in our fields;
our oxen will draw heavy loads.
There will be no breaching of walls,
no going into captivity,
no cry of distress in our streets.
Blessed is the people of whom this is true;
blessed is the people whose God is the Lord." (Psalm 144:12-15)

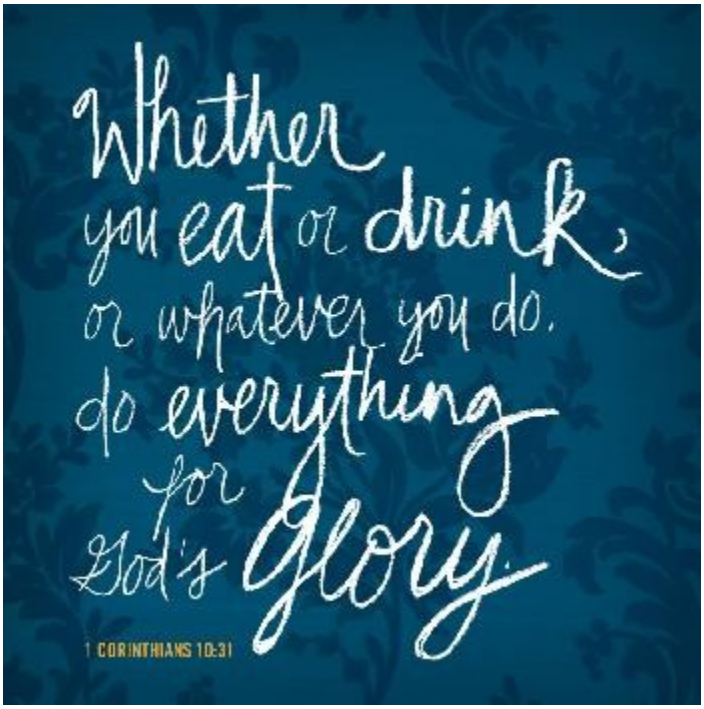
1 Corinthians 10:14-33

Paul finally gets to the heart of his discussion and teaching: "Therefore, my dear friends, flee from idolatry." (1 Cor. 10:14). He then explains that those who offer sacrifices to God at the altar "participate" in the altar. Those who eat the bread and drink the wine "participate" in the sacrifice – the very body and blood- of Christ. So then we should avoid idolatry- not because the sacrifice (in this case focus is on the "meat") is a problem, but the service of sacrifice to an idol involves worship of demons. It is the worship of evil that is the issue, not the "meat" offered.

Paul argues convincingly that we cannot participate in the “cup” of both demons and the Lord Jesus at the same time: *“I speak to sensible people; judge for yourselves what I say. Is not the cup of thanksgiving for which we give thanks a participation in the blood of Christ? And is not the bread that we break a participation in the body of Christ? Because there is one loaf, we, who are many, are one body, for we all share the one loaf. Consider the people of Israel: Do not those who eat the sacrifices participate in the altar? Do I mean then that food sacrificed to an idol is anything, or that an idol is anything? No, but the sacrifices of pagans are offered to demons, not to God, and I do not want you to be participants with demons. You cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons too; you cannot have a part in both the Lord’s table and the table of demons”* (1 Cor. 10:15-21)

We then come to another key teaching- we have “freddom in Christ”- but it is not absolute! We are not “free” to act as a stumbling block for other believers, whose opinions about “meat sacrificed to idols” or any other issue is deifferent from ours. We do not practice Christianity in a vacuum- there are always “others” around us who are influenced- for good or ill- by our actions, witness, and attitudes: *“I have the right to do anything,” you say—but not everything is beneficial. “I have the right to do anything”—but not everything is constructive. No one should seek their own good, but the good of others.”* (1 Cor. 10:23-24)

Paul then points us to a powerful teaching- everything we do should be for the glory of God! We are here to learn to love and fellowship with Him, to worship, love and glorify Him. This is our highest calling: *“So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God. Do not cause anyone to stumble, whether Jews, Greeks or the church of God— even as I try to please everyone in every way. For I am not seeking my own good but the good of many, so that they may be saved.”* (1 Cor. 10:31-33). And when we participate in God’s kingdom building, some may (and will) be saved…and there will be great rejoicing in heaven (Luke 15:7-10)!



Psalm 145-147 August 31, 2014 1 Cor 11:1-13

Psalm 145 is an acrostic poem- each verse begins with a successive letter of the Hebrew alphabet. It is a psalm/sog of praise, attributed to David. It is a beautiful example of a song of praise, in whuch worshippers voice their adoration, devotion and love to their Creator God.

The psalm begins with a listing of the glorious attributes, character and righteous actions of God:

"Great is the Lord and most worthy of praise;
his greatness no one can fathom.
One generation commends your works to another;
they tell of your mighty acts.
They speak of the glorious splendor of your majesty—
and I will meditate on your wonderful works.
They tell of the power of your awesome works—
and I will proclaim your great deeds.
They celebrate your abundant goodness
and joyfully sing of your righteousness.
The Lord is gracious and compassionate,
slow to anger and rich in love.
The Lord is good to all;
he has compassion on all he has made." (Psalm 145:3-9)

The very works of His hand bear tribute and show evidence of their amazing Creator:

"All your works praise you, Lord;
your faithful people extol you.
They tell of the glory of your kingdom
and speak of your might,
so that all people may know of your mighty acts
and the glorious splendor of your kingdom." (Psalm 145:10-12)

Once again we see a phrase in a psalm that has been transposed to a modern setting- this one the lovely choral work "The Eyes of All Wait Upon Thee" by Jean Burget (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Rv4pcothYZ8):

"The eyes of all look to you,
and you give them their food at the proper time.
You open your hand
and satisfy the desires of every living thing." (Psalm 145:15-16)

The psalmist then praises God for His protection, righteousness and watchfulness:

The Lord is righteous in all his ways
and faithful in all he does.
The Lord is near to all who call on him,
to all who call on him in truth.
He fulfills the desires of those who fear him;
he hears their cry and saves them.
The Lord watches over all who love him,
but all the wicked he will destroy.
My mouth will speak in praise of the Lord.
Let every creature praise his holy name
for ever and ever." (Psalm 145:17-21)

What is permanent and what is temporal and fleeting? To whom (or what) should we pledge our lifetime of devotion and worship? The psalmist answers with a clear voice- the eternal and righteous God of the Universe- he alone is worthy of a lifetime of praise. Nothing (and no one) else is permanent and worthy! And how blessed (filled with joy and true fulfilment) are those who recognize and praise their God:

"Praise the Lord.
Praise the Lord, my soul.
I will praise the Lord all my life;
I will sing praise to my God as long as I live.
Do not put your trust in princes,
in human beings, who cannot save.
When their spirit departs, they return to the ground;
on that very day their plans come to nothing.
Blessed are those whose help is the God of Jacob,
whose hope is in the Lord their God." (Psalm 146:1-5)

And what of God is worthy of our praise and devotion? He is the Creator (verse 6); the righteous protector of the innocent oppressed (verse 7); he is the One who frees the prisoners- those entrapped by physical walls, illness, or spiritual darkness (verse 7), He gives the blind their sight (verse 8- and shown by example John 9:1); He is the lover of the righteous (verse 8); the One who "watches over" the fatherless, foreigner and widow (verse 9); and the King who reighn forever (verse 10). Why should we than not praise Him?

"He is the Maker of heaven and earth,
the sea, and everything in them—
he remains faithful forever.
He upholds the cause of the oppressed
and gives food to the hungry.
The Lord sets prisoners free,
the Lord gives sight to the blind,
the Lord lifts up those who are bowed down,
the Lord loves the righteous.
The Lord watches over the foreigner
and sustains the fatherless and the widow,
but he frustrates the ways of the wicked.
The Lord reigns forever,
your God, O Zion, for all generations.
Praise the Lord." (Psalm 146:6-10)

Music has always been an important part of worship. The effects of music on brain wave patterns has been well documented (http://www.livestrong.com/article/157461-how-music-affects-the-human-brain/). From a spiritual standpoint, we open our emotions and spirits to God in ways that we cannot ordinarily. The psalmist challenges us to use both voice and musical instruments to praise the Living God. In modern times, there has been some controversy about instrumental music in worship. Some denominations, who model themselves after the New Testament church, correctly contend that instrumental music is not mentioned in descriptions of New Testament worship. Regardless of whether the worship musin involves voice, instruments or both, it is a clear need of the human spirit to worship with music! The psalmist points this out in this song of praise:

"Praise the Lord.
How good it is to sing praises to our God,
how pleasant and fitting to praise him!
The Lord builds up Jerusalem;
he gathers the exiles of Israel.
He heals the brokenhearted
and binds up their wounds.
He determines the number of the stars
and calls them each by name.
Great is our Lord and mighty in power;
his understanding has no limit.
The Lord sustains the humble

but casts the wicked to the ground.
Sing to the Lord with grateful praise;
make music to our God on the harp." (Psalm 147:1-7)

In the remainder of the psalm, we praise God for His mighty works in the weather (verse 8); His provision of food and sustenance for his creatures (verse 9); His delight in those who fear (worship with awe and respect and follow His commandments) –verse 11; the God who protects by strengthening the gates (verse 13); who sends Hos Word to us (verses 15 and 19); who brings peace "Shalom" (verse 14); who has selected His people- and no others- for His special revelation (verses 19,20). He is worthy of our enthusiastic and ringing praise (verse 20).

"He covers the sky with clouds;
he supplies the earth with rain
and makes grass grow on the hills.
He provides food for the cattle
and for the young ravens when they call.
His pleasure is not in the strength of the horse,
nor his delight in the legs of the warrior;
the Lord delights in those who fear him,
who put their hope in his unfailing love.
Extol the Lord, Jerusalem;
praise your God, Zion.
He strengthens the bars of your gates
and blesses your people within you.
He grants peace to your borders
and satisfies you with the finest of wheat.
He sends his command to the earth;
his word runs swiftly.
He spreads the snow like wool
and scatters the frost like ashes.
He hurls down his hail like pebbles.
Who can withstand his icy blast?
He sends his word and melts them;
he stirs up his breezes, and the waters flow.
He has revealed his word to Jacob,
his laws and decrees to Israel.
He has done this for no other nation;
they do not know his laws.
Praise the Lord." (Psalm 147:8-20)

1 Cor 11:1-13

1 Corinthians 11 begins innocently enough, but then diverts into an area that would certainly be controversial in the modern era. Paul starts by admonishing us (the Corinthians originally) to "follow the example of Christ" and "hold to traditions" (verse 1-2). He then launches into a discussion of women covering their heads

during worship. Certainly women covering their heads in worship is a phenomenon that has been observed in the modern age- many Protestant churches up until about the 1960s saw women wearing "hats" of various descriptions to church; our Roman Catholic sisers traditionally wear hats or scarves during worship, and many African American church women wear hat to church to this day. In many cases, we are seeing a reflection of either culture or fashion. Jesus was very clear in His view of women as equals with men spiritually (http://www.gci.org/church/ministry/women6a).

So what do we do with this teaching of Paul? The scripture reads this way: *"Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ. I praise you for remembering me in everything and for holding to the traditions just as I passed them on to you. But I want you to realize that the head of every man is Christ, and the head of the woman is man, and the head of Christ is God. Every man who prays or prophesies with his head covered dishonors his head. But every woman who prays or prophesies with her head uncovered dishonors her head—it is the same as having her head shaved. For if a woman does not cover her head, she might as well have her hair cut off; but if it is a disgrace for a woman to have her hair cut off or her head shaved, then she should cover her head."* (1 Cor. 11:1-6)

Paul continues on this theme, and almost comes out with a statement that the two genders are equal (verses 8-9): *"A man ought not to cover his head, since he is the image and glory of God; but woman is the glory of man. For man did not come from woman, but woman from man; neither was man created for woman, but woman for man. It is for this reason that a woman ought to have authority over her own head, because of the angels. Nevertheless, in the Lord woman is not independent of man, nor is man independent of woman. For as woman came from man, so also man is born of woman. But everything comes from God. Judge for yourselves: Is it proper for a woman to pray to God with her head uncovered?"* (1 Cor. 11:7-13)

The commentary is somewhat helpful here, although the reference I found most illuminating essentially "spiritualizes" the whole argument and contends that the covering of a woman's head in that culture was a symbol of submission, and the order and dignity of worship would be marred with "disrespectful behavior" (http://www.gotquestions.org/head-coverings.html). I leave it to your conscience as to the application of these verses to contemporary worship. I certainly have not discovered a definitive or satisfying explanation of this part of Paul's letter!

Psalm 148-150 September 1, 2014 1 Corinthians 11:16-34

The psalms of praise complete our journey through this marvelous book in the Bible. The several times I have plumbed the depths of its richness are now finally surpassed by this journaling through the Scripture. I am so grateful that God loves our worship and praise. It is so satisfying and delightful to be in His presence, in the very middle of His will, and lifting up songs/psalms of praise, joy and remembrance of His marvelluos personality and character. God truly inhabits the praise of His people (Psalm 22:3)!

Psalm 148 invokes praise not just from those of His people on earth but from the very heavens. All of creation is asked to join in the praise of the Creator:

“Praise the Lord.[a]
Praise the Lord from the heavens;
praise him in the heights above.
Praise him, all his angels;
praise him, all his heavenly hosts.
Praise him, sun and moon;
praise him, all you shining stars.
Praise him, you highest heavens
and you waters above the skies.” (Psalm 148:1-4)

All that was created is a permanent testimony to the loving God who created everthing that is:

“Let them praise the name of the Lord,
for at his command they were created,
and he established them for ever and ever—
he issued a decree that will never pass away. (Psalm 148:5-6)

This is the same God who raised up a people, selected by Him to be a light and a blessing to the nations:

“Let them praise the name of the Lord,
for his name alone is exalted;
his splendor is above the earth and the heavens.
And he has raised up for his people a horn,
the praise of all his faithful servants,
of Israel, the people close to his heart.
Praise the Lord.” (Psalm 148:13-14)

The praise continues in Psalm 149. This psalm is dicvided thematically into two sections. The first part (verses 1-5) is a simple call to praise by His people. The second half, though, is a reflection of the humanity not only of the psalmist but the people from which he came. God is invoked as a “punishing corrector”- a “double edged sword” (verse 6) that is invoked to punish and correct those who do evil. This is certainly an understandable emotion given the long torturous history of the nation Israel. Again, God does not bless our vengeance - it is His alone (Romans 12:9):

“Praise the Lord.
Sing to the Lord a new song,
his praise in the assembly of his faithful people.
Let Israel rejoice in their Maker;
let the people of Zion be glad in their King.
Let them praise his name with dancing
and make music to him with timbrel and harp.
For the Lord takes delight in his people;
he crowns the humble with victory.

Let his faithful people rejoice in this honor
and sing for joy on their beds.
May the praise of God be in their mouths
and a double-edged sword in their hands,
to inflict vengeance on the nations
and punishment on the peoples,
to bind their kings with fetters,
their nobles with shackles of iron,
to carry out the sentence written against them—
this is the glory of all his faithful people.
Praise the Lord." (Psalm 149:1-9)

Finally, the psalms urge us to praise God with "everything we've got!" We are to use singing, dancing, musical instruments, and a lot of joyous energy to lift His Name up and praise and worship Him- He is worthy!:

"Praise the Lord.[d]
Praise God in his sanctuary;
praise him in his mighty heavens.
Praise him for his acts of power;
praise him for his surpassing greatness.
Praise him with the sounding of the trumpet,
praise him with the harp and lyre,
praise him with timbrel and dancing,
praise him with the strings and pipe,
praise him with the clash of cymbals,
praise him with resounding cymbals.
Let everything that has breath praise the Lord.
Praise the Lord." (Psalm 150:1-6)

Let everything that "has breath"- everthying that lives and breathes- praise His glorious Name! Amen and Amen.

http://fumchurch.com/2014/03/09/psalm-150-praise-service-this-sunday/

1 Corinthians 11:14-34

Paul then moves from a discussion/teaching about the covering of a woman's head in worship to the divisive practices that have marred the worship of the church in Corinth. When the church gathered, they were in the practice of eating, partly as a

celebration of the Last Supper. Their practice though was that the wealthy brought a bounty of food and drink, and even became intoxicated, while the poor had nothing or nearly nothing: *"In the following directives I have no praise for you, for your meetings do more harm than good. In the first place, I hear that when you come together as a church, there are divisions among you, and to some extent I believe it. No doubt there have to be differences among you to show which of you have God's approval. So then, when you come together, it is not the Lord's Supper you eat, for when you are eating, some of you go ahead with your own private suppers. As a result, one person remains hungry and another gets drunk. Don't you have homes to eat and drink in? Or do you despise the church of God by humiliating those who have nothing? What shall I say to you? Shall I praise you? Certainly not in this matter!"* (1 Cor. 11:17-22)

Paul reminds them of the commission and commandment that Jesus gave His followers as to how they were to remember Him in this sacrament: *"For I received from the Lord what I also passed on to you: The Lord Jesus, on the night he was betrayed, took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, "This is my body, which is for you; do this in remembrance of me." In the same way, after supper he took the cup, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood; do this, whenever you drink it, in remembrance of me." For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes."* (1 Cor. 11:23-26)

So instead of honoring and remembering Jesus, these followers celebrated in a truly unworthy manner. This, Paul reminds them, is the reason for some of them becoming sick or even dying. God always allows consequences to occur when His people are unfaithful or dishonor His Name: *"So then, whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of sinning against the body and blood of the Lord. Everyone ought to examine themselves before they eat of the bread and drink from the cup. For those who eat and drink without discerning the body of Christ eat and drink judgment on themselves. That is why many among you are weak and sick, and a number of you have fallen asleep."* (1 Cor. 11:27-30) We may remember that in the Hebrew Scriptures, there were many examples of God's people suffering illness or death as a consequence of their unfaithfulness.

Paul explains that this "bad consequence" is a means of God's discipline- we are being saved from a greater sin and greater error by not having our unfaithfulness be our witness to the world: *"But if we were more discerning with regard to ourselves, we would not come under such judgment. Nevertheless, when we are judged in this way by the Lord, we are being disciplined so that we will not be finally condemned with the world. So then, my brothers and sisters, when you gather to eat, you should all eat together. Anyone who is hungry should eat something at home, so that when you meet together it may not result in judgment. And when I come I will give further directions."* (1 Cor. 11:31-34). We must always ask for, and exercise, discernment- it is a gift from God for our benefit!

Proverbs 1-2 September 2, 2014 1 Corinthians 12

Once again I can just “hear” the “higher critics” of Scripture muttering and complaining. Despite the fact that the Scripture itself plainly assigns authorship of proverbs to Solomon, they will (and do) insist on multiple authorship (http://www.faith.edu/resources/publications/faith-pulpit/message/the-authorship-of-proverbs-30/read). Never mind that this assignment by Scripture is logical- as is the attribution of Ecclesiastes to Solomon as well (although I agree that there is a latter “addendum” to Ecclesiastes. Solomon was perhaps the most spectacularly successful king of Israel. He accumulated wealth and influence, and Israel was at its earthly zenith under his leadership. He had an interest in all knids of learning, and had asked for- and was given- wisdom by God. It should not surprise us, then, that Solomon would record his “wise sayings” or proverbs for our benefit. The Scripture begins this way:

“The proverbs of Solomon son of David, king of Israel:
for gaining wisdom and instruction;
for understanding words of insight;
for receiving instruction in prudent behavior,
doing what is right and just and fair;
for giving prudence to those who are simple,
knowledge and discretion to the young—
let the wise listen and add to their learning,
and let the discerning get guidance—
for understanding proverbs and parables,
the sayings and riddles of the wise.
The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge,
but fools despise wisdom and instruction.” (Prov. 1:1-7)

Proverbs is a book of poetry, and one of the devices of Hebrew postry was repetition, often rephrasing the same thought for emphasis or to aid in its memorization. We have a clear example here:

“Listen, my son, to your father’s instruction
and do not forsake your mother’s teaching.
They are a garland to grace your head
and a chain to adorn your neck.” (Prov. 1:8-9)

Notice the repetition- your “father’s instruction and your “mother’s” teaching! The advice continues, and the young man is warned about the folly of following evil and evil persons:

“My son, if sinful men entice you,
do not give in to them.
If they say, “Come along with us;
let’s lie in wait for innocent blood,
let’s ambush some harmless soul;
let’s swallow them alive, like the grave,
and whole, like those who go down to the pit;
we will get all sorts of valuable things
and fill our houses with plunder;
cast lots with us;
we will all share the loot”—
my son, do not go along with them,

do not set foot on their paths;
for their feet rush into evil,
they are swift to shed blood.
How useless to spread a net
where every bird can see it!
These men lie in wait for their own blood;
they ambush only themselves!
Such are the paths of all who go after ill-gotten gain;
it takes away the life of those who get it." (Prov. 1:10-19).

As Paul teaches us later, the wages of sin is death (Romans 6:23) and this is an excellent example of this principle. The evill men "ambush only themselves" (verse 18).

Wisdom is then personified as a woman calling out to both the simple and the wise:

"Out in the open wisdom calls aloud,
she raises her voice in the public square;
on top of the wall she cries out,
at the city gate she makes her speech:
"How long will you who are simple love your simple ways?
How long will mockers delight in mockery
and fools hate knowledge?
Repent at my rebuke!
Then I will pour out my thoughts to you,
I will make known to you my teachings." (Prov. 1:20-23)

Solomon then contrasts the outlook and outcomes of those who listen and the "fools" who do not listen to wisdom:

"For the waywardness of the simple will kill them,
and the complacency of fools will destroy them;
but whoever listens to me will live in safety
and be at ease, without fear of harm." (Prov. 1:32-33)

In Proverbs 2, the imagery changes somewhat- in this case the wise one is a father or trusted elder speaking to a young man, advising him of the "way that leads to life", which Jesus will expand for us later in the Scriptures (Matthew 7:13-14), advising the young man to choose wisely the way that he is to go:

"My son, if you accept my words
and store up my commands within you,
turning your ear to wisdom
and applying your heart to understanding—
indeed, if you call out for insight
and cry aloud for understanding,
and if you look for it as for silver
and search for it as for hidden treasure,
then you will understand the fear of the Lord
and find the knowledge of God.

For the Lord gives wisdom;
from his mouth come knowledge and understanding.
He holds success in store for the upright,
he is a shield to those whose walk is blameless,
for he guards the course of the just
and protects the way of his faithful ones." (Prov. 2:1-8)

The wise teacher advises the young man that if he follows the wisdom and teachings of God, he will successfully avoid both "wicked men" (verse 12) and an "adulterous woman" (verse 16). The consequences of the young man's choice are presented as significant and lasting:

"Thus you will walk in the ways of the good
and keep to the paths of the righteous.
For the upright will live in the land,
and the blameless will remain in it;
but the wicked will be cut off from the land,
and the unfaithful will be torn from it." (Prov. 2:20-22).

1 Corinthians 12

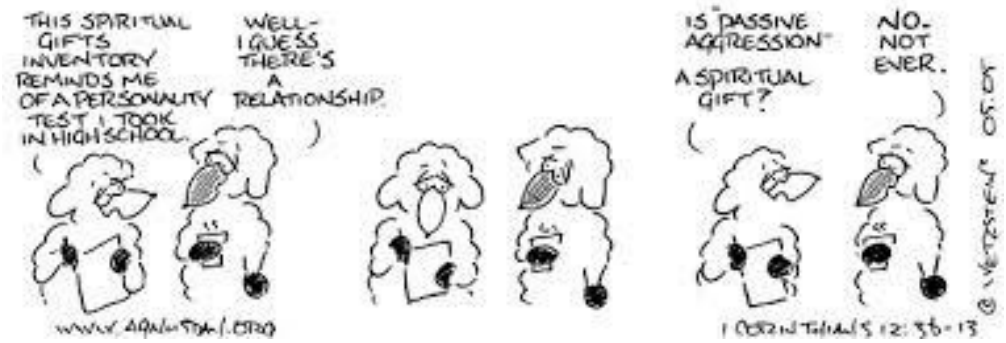
1 Corinthians 12 is best seen as a "prologue" to the often quoted "love chapter" of 1 Corinthians 13. The division of what was originally a single letter is of coousrse somewhat arbitratry, and we see the consequence of that artificial division here very clearly. Paul never wrote a simple sentence or expressed a simple thought when a complex one would do! He is introducing several key themes of importance to the believers in Corinth as well as to us: 1) the gifts of the spirit; 2) the place of the gifts as a unifying force in the church, and finally (in chapter 13), the central importance of the gift of love- itself a gift of the Spirit!

First Paul discusses the various gifts given to us by the Spirit, and describes how each believer is uniquely gifted: *"Now about the gifts of the Spirit, brothers and sisters, I do not want you to be uninformed. You know that when you were pagans, somehow or other you were influenced and led astray to mute idols. Therefore I want you to know that no one who is speaking by the Spirit of God says, "Jesus be cursed," and no one can say, "Jesus is Lord," except by the Holy Spirit. There are different kinds of gifts, but the same Spirit distributes them. There are different kinds of service, but the same Lord. There are different kinds of working, but in all of them and in everyone it is the same God at work. Now to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good. To one there is given through the Spirit a message of wisdom, to another a message of knowledge by means of the same Spirit, to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by that one Spirit, to another miraculous powers, to another prophecy, to another distinguishing between spirits, to another speaking in different kinds of tongues, and to still another the interpretation of tongues. All these are the work of one and the same Spirit, and he distributes them to each one, just as he determines."* (1 Cor. 12:1-11)

Notice that as Paul describes each gift, he emphasizes that they are all given by "the same Lord" (verse 5); "the same God at work" (verse 6) – all by "one and the

same Spirit" (verse 11). Paul uses a helpful analogy here to the human body- each "part" of the body is distinct, with differing purpose and function, but all the different "parts" are seen- and function- as a greater whole. Thus it is in the church- the various gifts are given to build up the body- the church- and equip the saints for service and kingdom building: *"Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it. And God has placed in the church first of all apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then miracles, then gifts of healing, of helping, of guidance, and of different kinds of tongues. Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work miracles? Do all have gifts of healing? Do all speak in tongues? Do all interpret? Now eagerly desire the greater gifts."*(1 Cor 12:27-31a)

Then, in a single (and simple!) sentence, Paul creates a transition to his timeless description of love- the true and pure love that is given to us from our loving Father: *"And yet I will show you the most excellent way."* (1 Cor. 12:31b)



http://www.agnusday.org/comics/13/1-corinthians-123-13

Proverbs 3-4 September 3, 2014 1 Corinthians 13

Again we have the literray device of a wise parent teaching a child. I am certain that God must feel somewhat the same with us…how perplexing it must be for Him to try so hard to help, guide and direct us only to see us abandon the teaching and direction He has provided. The parent holds up the virtues of love and faithfulness:

"My son, do not forget my teaching,
but keep my commands in your heart,
for they will prolong your life many years
and bring you peace and prosperity.
Let love and faithfulness never leave you;
bind them around your neck,
write them on the tablet of your heart.
Then you will win favor and a good name
in the sight of God and man." (Prov. 3:1-4)

Then we find a timeless and memorable teaching…"lean not on your own understanding". In the KJV this reads "..lean not unto thine own understanding.". The tendency in my own spiritual life is to believe- foolishly- that I "understand" and can trsut my own spiritual instincts without consulting the Word, praying or asking for direction. God has the whole picture, knows my circumstances and my own self better than I, and yet I tell Him "I've got this..!" What pain and sorrow I could avoid by totally depending on His wisdom and insight, His direction and guidance!

“Trust in the Lord with all your heart
and lean not on your own understanding;
in all your ways submit to him,
and he will make your paths straight.” (Proverbs 3:5-6)
We are told to “submit” and He will make our paths straight (in the direction he wants!) and yet we resist, argue and insist on our own way.

Our pride wants us to believe that we are “wise”…just like God. This is the pride that led to the Fall in Eden. The serpent/Satan asked “Did God really say….?” And then “You will not certainly die,” the serpent said to the woman. 5 “For God knows that when you eat from it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.” (Genesis 3:1; 5) We want to be “like God” and our pride led us to the sin that separated us from our loving Creator! When we submit our will rto His, we restore the proper moral order of the universe.

Solomon then teaches us about two more areas that we often rebel at following: 1) honoring God with our possessions and 2) accepting discipline from Him. Our pride tells us that what we have is “our stuff”, and we resist honoring God with our possessions- even in tithing which He clearly expects. Our reaction to God’s discipline is often anger and resentment. Yet the ttrue follower will grow spiritually to the point of understanding, at least in part, the critical nature of these two areas. These are areas that God uses to teach is the He is God, and that we are not!
“Honor the Lord with your wealth,
with the firstfruits of all your crops;
then your barns will be filled to overflowing,
and your vats will brim over with new wine.
My son, do not despise the Lord’s discipline,
and do not resent his rebuke,
because the Lord disciplines those he loves,
as a father the son he delights in.” (Prov 3:9-12)
God wants us to be “filled with joy” and to delight in Him and be “blessed”. The wisdom that He imparts to us is a precious gift, to be sought after and treasured forever:
“Blessed are those who find wisdom,
those who gain understanding,
for she is more profitable than silver
and yields better returns than gold.
She is more precious than rubies;
nothing you desire can compare with her.
Long life is in her right hand;
in her left hand are riches and honor.
Her ways are pleasant ways,
and all her paths are peace.
She is a tree of life to those who take hold of her;
those who hold her fast will be blessed.” (Prov. 3:13-18)
We are given instructions as to how to treat others fairly and with respect and love:
“Do not withhold good from those to whom it is due,

when it is in your power to act.
Do not say to your neighbor,
“Come back tomorrow and I’ll give it to you”—
when you already have it with you.
Do not plot harm against your neighbor,
who lives trustfully near you.
Do not accuse anyone for no reason—
when they have done you no harm.” (Prov. 3:27-30)

We have a clear choice- following God and receiving great blessings, or going “our own way” and receiving His correction and discipline:

“For the Lord detests the perverse
but takes the upright into his confidence.
The Lord’s curse is on the house of the wicked,
but he blesses the home of the righteous.
He mocks proud mockers
but shows favor to the humble and oppressed.
The wise inherit honor,
but fools get only shame.” (Prov. 3:32-35)

Proverbs 4 follows the same literary model as Proverbs 3. A wise parent is giving instruction to a young man. The prize that is to be sought, says the parent, is wisdom. The description of the wisdom sought is reminiscent of Jesus’ descriptiuon of the pearl of “great price” that the merchant sold all he had to obtain (Matthew 13:45-46):

“Then he taught me, and he said to me,
“Take hold of my words with all your heart;
keep my commands, and you will live.
5 Get wisdom, get understanding;
do not forget my words or turn away from them.
6 Do not forsake wisdom, and she will protect you;
love her, and she will watch over you.
7 The beginning of wisdom is this: Get wisdom.
Though it cost all you have, get understanding.
8 Cherish her, and she will exalt you;
embrace her, and she will honor you.
9 She will give you a garland to grace your head
and present you with a glorious crown.” (Prov. 4:4-9)

The rewards that God generously provides for following His ways, His wise ways, are plentiful. This is the life that we would always choose for ourselves- 1) long life (verse 10); 2) staright paths (verse 11), running without stumbling (verse 12):

“Listen, my son, accept what I say,
and the years of your life will be many.
11 I instruct you in the way of wisdom
and lead you along straight paths.
12 When you walk, your steps will not be hampered;

when you run, you will not stumble.
13 Hold on to instruction, do not let it go;
guard it well, for it is your life.
14 Do not set foot on the path of the wicked
or walk in the way of evildoers.
15 Avoid it, do not travel on it;
turn from it and go on your way.
16 For they cannot rest until they do evil;
they are robbed of sleep till they make someone stumble.
17 They eat the bread of wickedness
and drink the wine of violence." (Prov. 4:10-17)

The path of the righteous is full of life and light:

"The path of the righteous is like the morning sun,
shining ever brighter till the full light of day.
19 But the way of the wicked is like deep darkness;
they do not know what makes them stumble." (Prov. 4:18-19)

Perhaps most important of all, the path of wisdom and godliness leads to life:

My son, pay attention to what I say;
turn your ear to my words.
21 Do not let them out of your sight,
keep them within your heart;
22 for they are life to those who find them
and health to one's whole body.
23 Above all else, guard your heart,
for everything you do flows from it." (Prov. 4:20-23)

Jesus said to us that He was the giver of thrue life, eternal life (Matthew 7:13-14) and that He was sent to us to give life (John 3:16). The life of godliness is the only life worth having or living. Parsie to Him who provides that life to His children!

1 Corinthians 13

Literally whole books, doctoral theses, thousands of sermons and many other writings and reflections have been written, thought and preached about this marvelous chapter. I have read these verses at a funeral/memorial service for my mother-in-love, Edith Ansley, telling in my experience how she exemplified each of the wonderful attibutes Paul lists for us in this description of the Sprirtual gift of love. I can hardly add to the body of scholarship and inspired teaching and preaching about this one chapter, I can only provide a few brief personal reflections.

When Jesus was asked by the “experts” what the “greatest commandment was” He surprised (and perhaps delighted) them by responding this way: “Jesus replied: *“‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.”* (Matthew 22:37-40) Jesus quoted Deuteronomy 6:5 and Leviticus 19:18 to the experts, showing them that the answer was already available to them in God’s Word! What then did the experts lack? The very thing Jesus was pointing them to- love itself. It was not enough to “love” yourself, your position, your power and possessions, but the love that matters is sacrificial, wills the best for others, and seeks no reward. The Greek word here is agape- a type of love that had been seen only rarely before Jesus and Paul lifted it up to us as the very cornerstone of our life in the Lord.

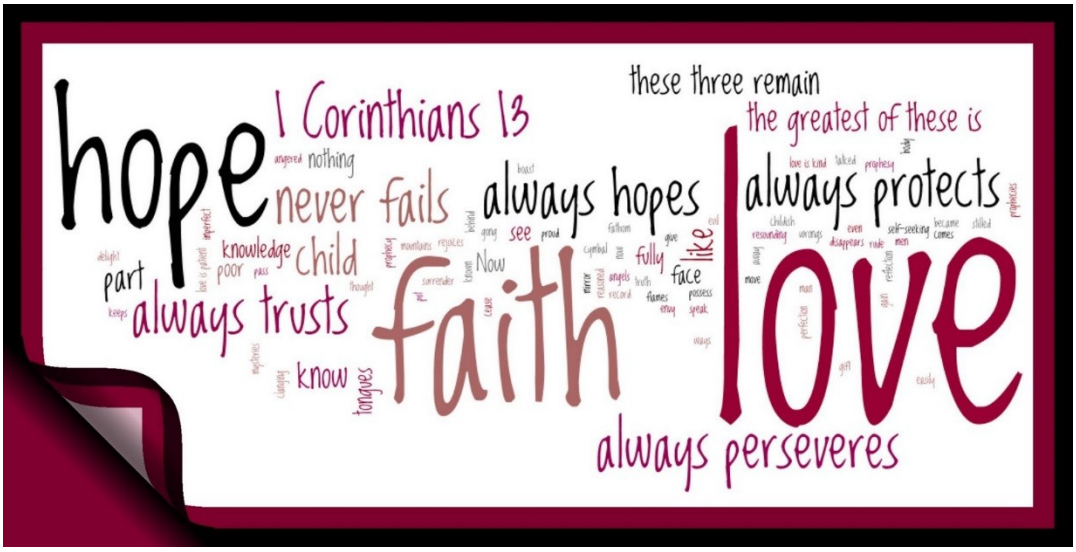
Paul writes: *“If I speak in the tongues of men or of angels, but do not have love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. If I give all I possess to the poor and give over my body to hardship that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing.”* (1 Cor 13:1-3). Neither tongues, prophesy, faith, or sacrificial giving in themselves are redeeming- only the selfless, sacrificial love that Jesus modeled for us in His obedience and sacrifice- even the sacrifice of His life for us!

Paul then catalogues what this “agape” is and is not: *“Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.”* (1 Cor. 13: 4-7) The core of this love in my own unbderstanding (which I am told by Scripture not to “lean on”!) is verse 5- love is not self- seeking. It is the truest selfless love we can ever imagine or practice. It is truly a gift from God and His Spirit- we could not hope to achieve it or “earn” it.

The fact is that love “never fails”! Those who love may fail, those who are loved may fail, but love itself- the pure and unalloyed love of our Father- never changes. It always refreshes, restores and heals. The other “gifts” may not be enduring, but love- God’s love- does endure:
“Love never fails. But where there are prophecies, they will cease; where there are tongues, they will be stilled; where there is knowledge, it will pass away. For we know in part and we prophesy in part, but when completeness comes, what is in part disappears.” (1 Cor. 13:8-10).

Paul alludes to the fact that he himself has “grown” spititually- he has now experienced God’s love, and has matured in his understanding and appreciation of it: *“When I was a child, I talked like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I put the ways of childhood behind me. For now we see only a reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known.”* (1 Cor. 13:11-12). It is both reassuring and terrifying to me that I will one day be “fully known”- although I confess it would be nice to “know fully”!

So, in the final analysis, the one gift that is both superior and enduring is love itself: *"And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love."* (1 Cor. 13:13)



Proverbs 5-6 September 4, 2014 1 Corinthians 14:1-20

Solomon provides us with guidance and insights about the sin of adultery. One might wonder how Solomon even would have time for an adulterous relationship, given his proclivity to marry and the number of wives he is recorded as having: *"He had seven hundred wives of royal birth and three hundred concubines, and his wives led him astray."* (1 Kings 11:3) He may have been presenting these words not from experience but from revelation. At any rate, the sin of adultery was a serious one in that it undermines the most fundamental unit of society, the family. In this modern age, it is sad to not that adultery is no longer an exclusive sin of the male gender- women find themselves straying from their marriages as well in increasing numbers.

Solomon tells us the "attractive" nature of this sin is deceptive- it is a pleasant façade that covers bitterness, despair and aimless living, and even death –spiritual and/or physical:

"For the lips of the adulterous woman drip honey,
and her speech is smoother than oil;
but in the end she is bitter as gall,
sharp as a double-edged sword.
Her feet go down to death;
her steps lead straight to the grave.
She gives no thought to the way of life;
her paths wander aimlessly, but she does not know it." (Prov 5:3-6).

He reminds us to take delight in the wife that we have- the wife of our youth (verse 18):

"Drink water from your own cistern,
running water from your own well.
Should your springs overflow in the streets,
your streams of water in the public squares?
Let them be yours alone,
never to be shared with strangers.
May your fountain be blessed,
and may you rejoice in the wife of your youth.
A loving doe, a graceful deer—
may her breasts satisfy you always,
may you ever be intoxicated with her love.
Why, my son, be intoxicated with another man's wife?
Why embrace the bosom of a wayward woman?" (Prov. 5:15-20)

We must remember that God is totally aware of our "secret sins" and that we are an open book to Him in His discernment and wisdom:

"For your ways are in full view of the Lord,
and he examines all your paths.
The evil deeds of the wicked ensnare them;
the cords of their sins hold them fast.
For lack of discipline they will die,
led astray by their own great folly." (Prov. 5:21-23)

Dave Ramsey is a popular radio personality who has made a business of advising on the means to personal wealth and freedom from debt. He is a believer, and employs Christian principles in his business- avoiding debt- especially credit card and othe consumer debt- as a means of "financial peace" (Prov. 22:7). One of his key principles, avoiding debt, is highlighted in this chapter of proverbs. Chapter 6 begins with a warning:

"My son, if you have put up security for your neighbor,
if you have shaken hands in pledge for a stranger,
you have been trapped by what you said,
ensnared by the words of your mouth.
So do this, my son, to free yourself,
since you have fallen into your neighbor's hands:
Go—to the point of exhaustion—[a]
and give your neighbor no rest!
Allow no sleep to your eyes,
no slumber to your eyelids.
Free yourself, like a gazelle from the hand of the hunter,
like a bird from the snare of the fowler." (Proverbs 6:1-5).

What is being described here is to put up security for someone else's loan, so that you are liable for the debt if the neighbor defaults. Sometimes parents are tempted

to do this for their children. This almost always leads to disaster and hurt feelings, for the parent almost always ends up with the debt, bad feelings, and a strained relationship with their child. It is even worse, Solomon argues, to gurantee a neighbor's debt!

Sluggardness is despised by Solomon (and others!)- he sees it as the patjhway to poverty and crushing debt:

"Go to the ant, you sluggard;
consider its ways and be wise!
It has no commander,
no overseer or ruler,
yet it stores its provisions in summer
and gathers its food at harvest.
How long will you lie there, you sluggard?
When will you get up from your sleep?
A little sleep, a little slumber,
a little folding of the hands to rest—
and poverty will come on you like a thief
and scarcity like an armed man." (Prov. 6:6-11)

Solomon then warns us that the troublemaker and "villian" will soon be undone by their own evil:

"A troublemaker and a villain,
who goes about with a corrupt mouth,
who winks maliciously with his eye,
signals with his feet
and motions with his fingers,
who plots evil with deceit in his heart—
he always stirs up conflict.
Therefore disaster will overtake him in an instant;
he will suddenly be destroyed—without remedy." (Prov. 6:12-15)

The poetry and symmetry of the next passage is unmistakeable, and probably served as an aid to memorization. This list is of things "God hates"- and we should be mindful of this list:

"There are six things the Lord hates,
seven that are detestable to him:
haughty eyes,
a lying tongue,
hands that shed innocent blood,
a heart that devises wicked schemes,
feet that are quick to rush into evil,
a false witness who pours out lies
and a person who stirs up conflict in the community." (Prov. 6:16-19)

I have promised myself not to be too obviously "political" in this journal, but I can't help myself! Those who stir up conflict in the community includes political

opportunists (who shall remain nameless but who clearly exist) who make “bad situations worse” and prevent persons of good will from solving problems in the community, whatever they might be!

The next passage in Proverbs 6 reads very similarly to Deuteronomy 6:4ff- the “Shema” (Hear, O Israel) and Psalm 119:105 *“Thy word is a lamp unto my feet, and a light unto my path.”* (Psalm 119:105 KJV). The Shema reads this way: *“Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength. These commandments that I give you today are to be on your hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates.”* (Deut. 6:4-9). This passage in Proverbs is:

“My son, keep your father’s command
and do not forsake your mother’s teaching.
Bind them always on your heart;
fasten them around your neck.
When you walk, they will guide you;
when you sleep, they will watch over you;
when you awake, they will speak to you.
For this command is a lamp,
this teaching is a light,
and correction and instruction
are the way to life,
keeping you from your neighbor’s wife,
from the smooth talk of a wayward woman.” (Proverbs 6:20-24)

The application of this key teaching of the Bible is that when we know, treasure, and meditate on God’s Word, it will guide our steps, provide illumination, and keep us from harm. When we love God, and know how to please and serve Him, then it becomes easier to do “the next right thing”!

However captivating and tempting another woman might be- another’s wife, a prostitute, anyone- the results are always the same! The temptation is there but can- and must- be conquered, even if only to avoid punishment:

“Do not lust in your heart after her beauty
or let her captivate you with her eyes.
For a prostitute can be had for a loaf of bread,
but another man’s wife preys on your very life.
Can a man scoop fire into his lap
without his clothes being burned?
Can a man walk on hot coals
without his feet being scorched?
So is he who sleeps with another man’s wife;
no one who touches her will go unpunished.” (Prov. 6:25-29)

As Solomon teaches us here, the offended husband is likely to deal out “fury and revenge”:

“People do not despise a thief if he steals
to satisfy his hunger when he is starving.
Yet if he is caught, he must pay sevenfold,
though it costs him all the wealth of his house.
But a man who commits adultery has no sense;
whoever does so destroys himself.
Blows and disgrace are his lot,
and his shame will never be wiped away.
For jealousy arouses a husband’s fury,
and he will show no mercy when he takes revenge.
He will not accept any compensation;
he will refuse a bribe, however great it is.” (Prov. 6:30-35)

A thief, stealing out of hunger, is not despised but must face compensation of his wrongful gain; but the adulterer is without excuse or sympathy (or even sense!).

1 Corinthians 14:1-20

Glossolalia, or “speaking in tongues” has been a controversial practice in both the early and modern church (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Glossolalia). The probable origin of this phenomenon is Acts 2:4, in which uneducated persons soke in “unknown tongues”- but it is clear to me that these “unknown” languages were “unknown” or “unlearned” by the one speaking. The listeners at Pentecost spoke a wide variety of languages, and yet each heard praise to and testimony about God’s Holy Spirit in their own native language. The purpose of this gift, it would seem, is to communicate! The complication comes in when we consider “prayer language” that may truly be “unknown”- a language that is truly unknown to all. Paul refers to this in his letter to the Christains in Rome (Romans 8:*26 “In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us through wordless groans.”*) Here the language is private- not a part of public worship- and the prayer is intercessory in focus. A third kind of “speaking in tongues” is presented in this part of Paul’s letter, that of the believer who is gifted with tongues, who speaks in tongues (the marginal note inteprets this as “other languages”) in the church during worship. Paul cautions us, though, that for worship to be in order that this utterance must then be interpreted for the church (1 Cor. 14:26-28).

Here are Paul’s words: *“Follow the way of love and eagerly desire gifts of the Spirit, especially prophecy. For anyone who speaks in a tongue does not speak to people but to God. Indeed, no one understands them; they utter mysteries by the Spirit. But the one who prophesies speaks to people for their strengthening, encouraging and comfort. Anyone who speaks in a tongue edifies themselves, but the one who prophesies edifies the church. I would like every one of you to speak in tongues, but I would rather have you prophesy. The one who prophesies is greater than the one who speaks in tongues, unless someone interprets, so that the church may be edified.”* (1 Cor. 14:1-5) The gift Paul is holding up for praise is that of prophesy-

clear words from God's Spirit- to guide and direct the church. Paul does mention that the public "speaking in tongues" should be interpreted (verse 5).

Paul is not belittling the gift of "speaking in tongues" – he testifies here that he speaks "more" than others, but again tries to illuminate the superiority of prophesy: *"I thank God that I speak in tongues more than all of you. But in the church I would rather speak five intelligible words to instruct others than ten thousand words in a tongue."* (1 Cor. 14:18-19).

We then get a very simple but critically important teaching: *"Brothers and sisters, stop thinking like children. In regard to evil be infants, but in your thinking be adults."* (1 Cor. 14:20). I think of so many times in my own spiritual walk that I have been the opposite- an "adult" and very sophisticated inregards to evil, and childlike in my thinking! Praise to the patient and loving God who both convicts and forgives me.

Proverbs 7-8 September 5, 2014 1 Corinthians 14:21-40

The theme of Proverbs 7 is the contrast between the "wise" who follow God's directions in their lives and the "simple" who can easily be misled into the ways of evil and of the world. Solomon urges the young man to make friends with- be ever close to wisdom. She (personified here) will keep us on the right and Godly path. The advantages of wisdom are presented first:

"My son, keep my words
and store up my commands within you.
Keep my commands and you will live;
guard my teachings as the apple of your eye.
Bind them on your fingers;
write them on the tablet of your heart.
Say to wisdom, "You are my sister,"
and to insight, "You are my relative."
They will keep you from the adulterous woman,
from the wayward woman with her seductive words." (Prov. 7:1-5)

Then we see the adulterous woman depicted- she is the moral opposite of "Lady Wisdom", and her wiles and ways lead to sin and death. The young man is advised against the short term "pleasures and excitement" of the adulterour woman, who is able to snare the "simple" who do not depend on God for wisdom and guidance:

"At the window of my house
I looked down through the lattice.
I saw among the simple,
I noticed among the young men,
a youth who had no sense.
He was going down the street near her corner,

walking along in the direction of her house
at twilight, as the day was fading,
as the dark of night set in.
Then out came a woman to meet him,
dressed like a prostitute and with crafty intent.
(She is unruly and defiant,
her feet never stay at home;
now in the street, now in the squares,
at every corner she lurks.)
She took hold of him and kissed him
and with a brazen face she said:
"Today I fulfilled my vows,
and I have food from my fellowship offering at home.
So I came out to meet you;
I looked for you and have found you!
I have covered my bed
with colored linens from Egypt.
I have perfumed my bed
with myrrh, aloes and cinnamon.
Come, let's drink deeply of love till morning;
let's enjoy ourselves with love!
My husband is not at home;
he has gone on a long journey.
He took his purse filled with money
and will not be home till full moon."
With persuasive words she led him astray;
she seduced him with her smooth talk.
All at once he followed her
like an ox going to the slaughter,
like a deer stepping into a noose
till an arrow pierces his liver,
like a bird darting into a snare,
little knowing it will cost him his life." (Prov. 7:6-23).

The conclusion of this "morality tale" is chilling- this activity can cost the "simple" their very life (verse 23). The adulterous woman has skillfully set up the situation so that the "simple" will be attracted and captured- after all, the husband is away (verse 19), the husband's purse is "filled with money" and he "will not be home till full moon" (verse 20). How could anyone resist? But resist we must (and can, with God's gracious help!). Equipped with this power from God we can avoid the "pit" that is before us. Remember, one of Satan's favorite disguises is as an angel of light (2 Corinthians 11:14):

"Now then, my sons, listen to me;
pay attention to what I say.
Do not let your heart turn to her ways
or stray into her paths.

Many are the victims she has brought down;
her slain are a mighty throng.
Her house is a highway to the grave,
leading down to the chambers of death." (Prov. 7:24-27)

In stark contrast to proverbs 7, in Proverbs 8 we see a fuller depiction of Wisdom. She is seen as calling out to the "people" with a "raised voice". What she offers is an inestimable treasure- and life itself!;

"Does not wisdom call out?
Does not understanding raise her voice?
At the highest point along the way,
where the paths meet, she takes her stand;
beside the gate leading into the city,
at the entrance, she cries aloud:
"To you, O people, I call out;
I raise my voice to all mankind.
You who are simple, gain prudence;
you who are foolish, set your hearts on it.[a]
Listen, for I have trustworthy things to say;
I open my lips to speak what is right.
My mouth speaks what is true,
for my lips detest wickedness.
All the words of my mouth are just;
none of them is crooked or perverse.
To the discerning all of them are right;
they are upright to those who have found knowledge.
Choose my instruction instead of silver,
knowledge rather than choice gold,
for wisdom is more precious than rubies,
and nothing you desire can compare with her." (Prov. 8:1-11)

Just as Jesus described the "pearl of great price" in His description of the Kingdom of God, this imagery is of priceless gems- here rubies (verse 11) rather than a pearl in Jesus' story. Nothing is more precious than wisdom, nothing more reliable than the Godly directions it provides. Wisdom, as personified in the Proverb, "loves" all that love her and will provide rich rewards:

"I love those who love me,
and those who seek me find me.
With me are riches and honor,
enduring wealth and prosperity.
My fruit is better than fine gold;
what I yield surpasses choice silver.
I walk in the way of righteousness,
along the paths of justice,
bestowing a rich inheritance on those who love me
and making their treasuries full." (Prov 8:17-21)

Wisdom here is describes as “co-eternal” with God, having been put in place along with the creation of the universe. The language here is parallel and reminiscent of the descriptions given by God to Job (38-40) and of Jesus as a partner in creation (John 1:1-3):

“The Lord brought me forth as the first of his works,
before his deeds of old;
I was formed long ages ago,
at the very beginning, when the world came to be.
When there were no watery depths, I was given birth,
when there were no springs overflowing with water;
before the mountains were settled in place,
before the hills, I was given birth,
before he made the world or its fields
or any of the dust of the earth.
I was there when he set the heavens in place,
when he marked out the horizon on the face of the deep,
when he established the clouds above
and fixed securely the fountains of the deep,
when he gave the sea its boundary
so the waters would not overstep his command,
and when he marked out the foundations of the earth.” (Prov. 8:22-29)

We should constantly seek out- and follow- Wisdom, for those who seek her find life:

“For those who find me find life
and receive favor from the Lord.
But those who fail to find me harm themselves;
all who hate me love death.” (Prov. 8:35-36)

1 Corinthians 14:21-40

Paul continues his teaching about tongues and their place in worship. He quotes the Hebrew Scriptures (Isaiah 28:11-12) in describing the effect of hearing tongues in worship on an “outsider”:

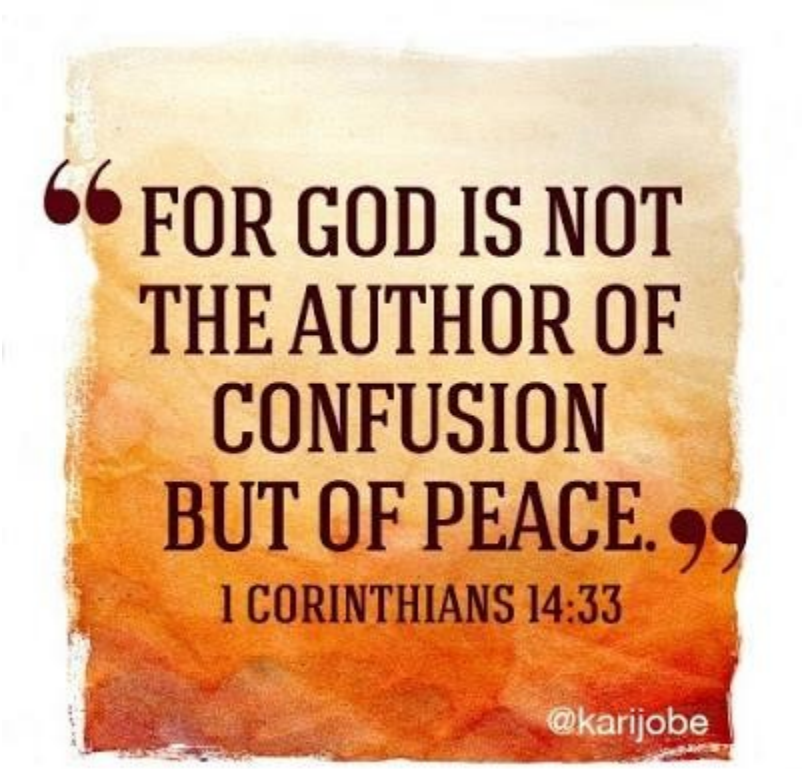
“Very well then, with foreign lips and strange tongues
God will speak to this people,
to whom he said,
“This is the resting place, let the weary rest”;
and, “This is the place of repose”—
but they would not listen.” (Isaiah 28:11-12)

Paul explains that an outsider, hearing unintelligible “tongues” would be confused (and may think the worshippers were out of their minds!) but if prophesy is heard- clearly and understandably uttered- it will have a profound effect- and by the power of the Spirit can convict and save:

“In the Law it is written:

“With other tongues
and through the lips of foreigners
I will speak to this people,
but even then they will not listen to me,
says the Lord.”
Tongues, then, are a sign, not for believers but for unbelievers; prophecy, however, is not for unbelievers but for believers. So if the whole church comes together and everyone speaks in tongues, and inquirers or unbelievers come in, will they not say that you are out of your mind? But if an unbeliever or an inquirer comes in while everyone is prophesying, they are convicted of sin and are brought under judgment by all, as the secrets of their hearts are laid bare. So they will fall down and worship God, exclaiming, “God is really among you!” (1 Cor. 14:21-25)

Everything should be done in order, and for the building up (not dividing!) of the church. Restraint and order are the key virtues, and even the prophet can- and should- control his prophesy so it is in keeping with the order and unity of the church: *”What then shall we say, brothers and sisters? When you come together, each of you has a hymn, or a word of instruction, a revelation, a tongue or an interpretation. Everything must be done so that the church may be built up. If anyone speaks in a tongue, two—or at the most three—should speak, one at a time, and someone must interpret. If there is no interpreter, the speaker should keep quiet in the church and speak to himself and to God. Two or three prophets should speak, and the others should weigh carefully what is said. And if a revelation comes to someone who is sitting down, the first speaker should stop. For you can all prophesy in turn so that everyone may be instructed and encouraged. The spirits of prophets are subject to the control of prophets. For God is not a God of disorder but of peace—as in all the congregations of the Lord’s people.”* (1 Cor. 14:26-33)
Paul certainly earned no points with the “activists” of his day- or of ours- in insisting that woment be “silent” in church. Some have interpreted this to mean that women should not preach, or even teach Sunday School classes to other than children. I was a member of such a church for a while. Historians tell us that there were many cases where women, who were typically less educated in that culture than men, would sometimes loudly ask questions or interrupt worship to have things “explained”. This teaching probably reflects Paul’s attempt to avoid such instances during worship (http://www.gci.org/church/ministry/women9): *“Women should remain silent in the churches. They are not allowed to speak, but must be in submission, as the law says. If they want to inquire about something, they should ask their own husbands at home; for it is disgraceful for a woman to speak in the church.”* (1 Cor. 14:34-35). Again, the key principle is order and unity within the church! *“Therefore, my brothers and sisters, be eager to prophesy, and do not forbid speaking in tongues. But everything should be done in a fitting and orderly way.”* (1 Cor. 14:39-40)



Proverbs 9-10 September 6, 2014 1 Corinthians 15:1-32

Wisdom and folly- two contrasting realities- and two very different personifications are presented to us in Proverbs 9. Wisdom is depicted as an organized and orderly woman who has built her house on “seven pillars”- seven being a number used biblically to indicate perfection. She invites those who are “simple” to come and partake of the meal she has prepared, and to gain wisdom and life by doing so:

“Wisdom has built her house;
she has set up its seven pillars.
She has prepared her meat and mixed her wine;
she has also set her table.
She has sent out her servants, and she calls
from the highest point of the city,
“Let all who are simple come to my house!”
To those who have no sense she says,
“Come, eat my food
and drink the wine I have mixed.
Leave your simple ways and you will live;
walk in the way of insight.” (Proverbs 9:1-6)

Solomon then reflects on the many benefits of living a life filled with God’s wisdom, and points to the unmistakable reality that a good and prosperous life has its origins in a spirit of communion and fellowship- in “fear” (awe and reverence) of the Lord:

“The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom,
and knowledge of the Holy One is understanding.
For through wisdom[b] your days will be many,

and years will be added to your life.
If you are wise, your wisdom will reward you;
if you are a mocker, you alone will suffer." (Prov. 9:10-12)

Then we see Folly depicted- also as a woman- and she beckons the simple toenjoy "stolen water" and "food eaten in secret" as a means of pleasure- but a pleasure that is short lived and that leads to destruction:

"Folly is an unruly woman;
she is simple and knows nothing.
She sits at the door of her house,
on a seat at the highest point of the city,
calling out to those who pass by,
who go straight on their way,
"Let all who are simple come to my house!"
To those who have no sense she says,
"Stolen water is sweet;
food eaten in secret is delicious!"
But little do they know that the dead are there,
that her guests are deep in the realm of the dead." (Prov. 9:13-18)

Proverbs 10 is the beginning of a section of this book that presents a series of "two liners"- couplets that teach the values of virtue, wisdom, hard work, godliness, neighborliness and many other virtues of the truly "wise" that follow God's Laws and commandments:

"A wise son brings joy to his father,
but a foolish son brings grief to his mother.
Ill-gotten treasures have no lasting value,
but righteousness delivers from death.
The Lord does not let the righteous go hungry,
but he thwarts the craving of the wicked.
Lazy hands make for poverty,
but diligent hands bring wealth." (Prov. 10:1-4).

We can hear echoes of other Scripture in these short and memorable proverbs- used as "teaching tools" for the acquisition and practice of Wisdom. Proverbs 10:1 is mirrored by Proverbs 11:29 *"..He that troubleth his own house shall inherit the wind: and the fool shall be servant to the wise of heart."* (KJV) which was the inspiration for the play "Inherit the Wind". Verse 3, about the righteous not going hungry, is a theme we also see in the Psalms (Psalm 37:25) *"I was young and now I am old, yet I have never seen the righteous forsaken or their children begging bread."* Verse 4 reminds us how laziness leads to poverty, a theme already explored in Proverbs 6:6-11)

One of my favorite proverbs is mirrored in this verse:

"Sin is not ended by multiplying words,
but the prudent hold their tongues." (Prov. 10:19)

This is almost excetly parallel to Proverbs 15:1

"A gentle answer turns away wrath,
but a harsh word stirs up anger."

Here, and in so many other places in Proverbs and the rest of Scripture, is seen the vivid contrast between the righteous and the wicked:
"The righteous will never be uprooted,
but the wicked will not remain in the land.
From the mouth of the righteous comes the fruit of wisdom,
but a perverse tongue will be silenced.
The lips of the righteous know what finds favor,
but the mouth of the wicked only what is perverse." (Prov. 10:30-32)

1 Corinthians 15:1-32

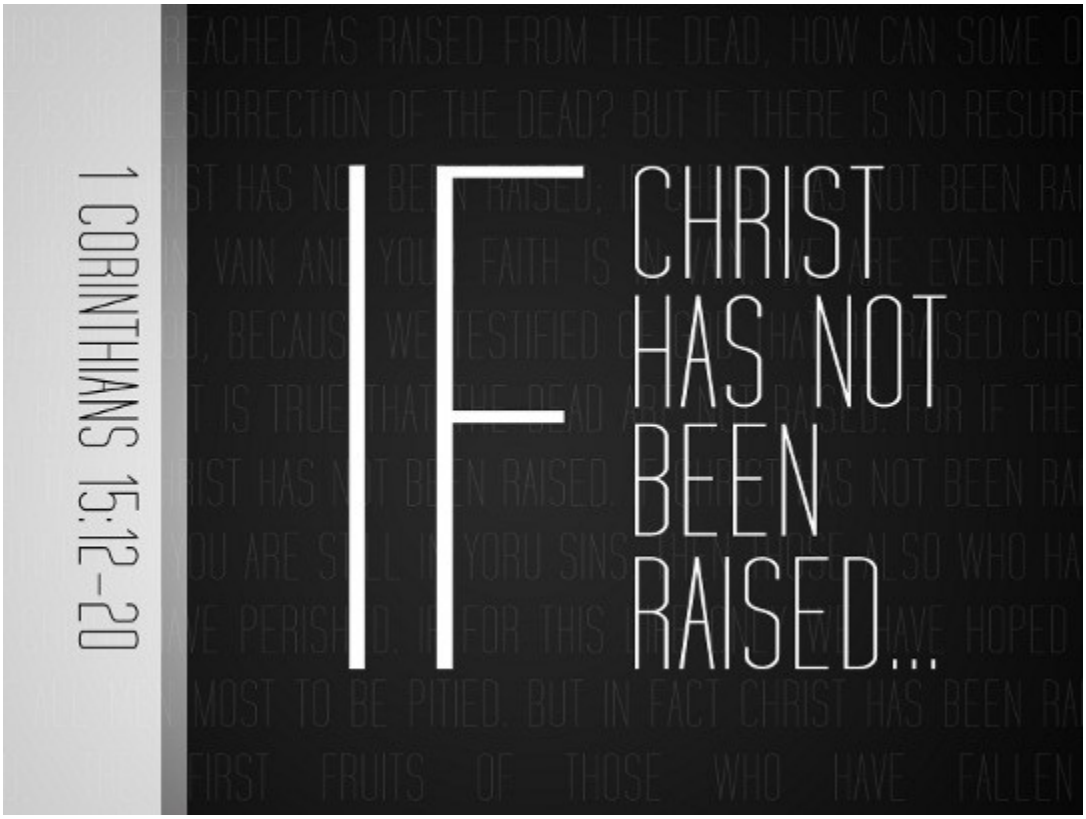
Paul quickly comes down to the bare facts and realities of the Christian life- either Jesus was resurrected, and reigns supremen with His Father in heaven, or he was not resurrected, and we are above all the inhabitants of the earth most foolish and most to be pitied: *"Now, brothers and sisters, I want to remind you of the gospel I preached to you, which you received and on which you have taken your stand. By this gospel you are saved, if you hold firmly to the word I preached to you. Otherwise, you have believed in vain."* (1 Cor. 15:1-2).

Paul knows the truth about the resurrected Jesus not from teachings, or second hand accounts, but from his own life's experience. Christ died for the sins of all: *"For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, and then to the Twelve. After that, he appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers and sisters at the same time, most of whom are still living, though some have fallen asleep. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles, and last of all he appeared to me also, as to one abnormally born."* (1 Cor. 15:3-8). I find it fascinating that Paul would refer to himself as one "abnormally born" (verse 8).

The apostle then rightfully questions the Corinthians' lack of faith. Why would they not believe in the resurrection? If this central truth is not indeed the truth, then all that the church has done is ultimately for nothing: *"But if it is preached that Christ has been raised from the dead, how can some of you say that there is no resurrection of the dead? If there is no resurrection of the dead, then not even Christ has been raised. And if Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith. More than that, we are then found to be false witnesses about God, for we have testified about God that he raised Christ from the dead. But he did not raise him if in fact the dead are not raised. For if the dead are not raised, then Christ has not been raised either. And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins. Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ are lost. If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied."* (1 Cor. 15:12-19)

Paul then goes on to confidently proclaim the Jesus he knows- and met on the Damascus Road, is indeed alive and has conquered both sin and death for all of us: *"But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. For since death came through a man, the resurrection of the dead*

comes also through a man. For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive. But each in turn: Christ, the firstfruits; then, when he comes, those who belong to him. Then the end will come, when he hands over the kingdom to God the Father after he has destroyed all dominion, authority and power. For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. The last enemy to be destroyed is death. For he "has put everything under his feet." Now when it says that "everything" has been put under him, it is clear that this does not include God himself, who put everything under Christ. When he has done this, then the Son himself will be made subject to him who put everything under him, so that God may be all in all." (1 Cor. 15:20-28)



http://sovjoy.com/2011/08/

Proverbs 11, 12 September 7, 2014 1 Corinthians 15:33-58

Couplets of wisdom gained from godly living- these are the treasure that is opened to us as we read through the proverbs listed here. Most of these have their origin in Solomon himself, although others have been credited as the source of some of these in the Book of Proverbs, notably Agur: The Hebrew Bible describes the author of Proverbs as 'Solomon, the Son of David, King of Israel.' 1:1 However as Chapter 31 shows they may not all have been written by Solomon. Some Proverbs are ascribed to 'the Sayings of the wise' as mentioned in Proverbs 22:17; 24:23. Chapter 30 is attributed to Agur, Son of Jakeh. Solomon wrote more than three thousand Proverbs but only a small portion of these have been preserved by God." (http://www.answers.com/Q/Who_is_the_author_of_proverbs)

Proverbs 11 starts with these nuggets of wisdom:

“The Lord detests dishonest scales,
but accurate weights find favor with him.
When pride comes, then comes disgrace,
but with humility comes wisdom.
The integrity of the upright guides them,
but the unfaithful are destroyed by their duplicity.
Wealth is worthless in the day of wrath,
but righteousness delivers from death.” (Proverbs 11:1-4)

When I was in federal government service, I often had dealings with the National Bureau of Standards (NBS), later changed in name- but not in mission- to the National Institute of Standards and Technology (NIST). One of their most critical missions was to ensure that standards for mass, length and othe measurements vital to commerce were maintained to the highest extent technology would allow. God has the same exacting standrds- He hates “dishonest scales” (verse 1) because of the dishonesty and lack of morality they represent. He also despises our pride- one of the original “7 deadly sins” since pride leads to idolatry and self-righteousness. Wealth is truly worthless on the day of judgment (verse 4)- you really “can’t take it with you”! Righteousness lasts and is “portable” you can- and do- take it with you to the Day of Judgment.

Solomon’s wisdom is shown in a series of short, easily memorized, and memorable couplets. This structure allowed the poet to cover a series of subjects with short and swift strokes- capturing the very essence of each teaching and lesson:

“For lack of guidance a nation falls,
but victory is won through many advisers.
15 Whoever puts up security for a stranger will surely suffer,
but whoever refuses to shake hands in pledge is safe.
16 A kindhearted woman gains honor,
but ruthless men gain only wealth.
17 Those who are kind benefit themselves,
but the cruel bring ruin on themselves.
18 A wicked person earns deceptive wages,
but the one who sows righteousness reaps a sure reward.” (Prov. 11:14-18).

It is sad to me that verse 14 is so directly applicable to the America I love so much. We truly lack leadership- moral and godly leadership- at all levels and do not have the “guidance” that we need and that God expects. Many godly advisors, if they are sought out and listened to, can allevaiate so many of these problesm. Our issue seems that many in leadership “don’t listen”!

There is even some sly humor hidden away amidst all this seriousness and wise counsel. Who could fail to see the humor of the picture in verse 22 of a “gold ring in a pig’s snout”? It kind of reminds me of the rhetorical expression “lipstick on a pig”,

or even Jesus' more serious description of "pearls before swine" (Matthew 7:6). The proverbs are:

"Like a gold ring in a pig's snout
    is a beautiful woman who shows no discretion.
23 The desire of the righteous ends only in good,
    but the hope of the wicked only in wrath." (Prov. 11:22-23)

Strife within the family- especially as to the one who causes it- is described in the harsh light of truth:

"Whoever brings ruin on their family will inherit only wind,
    and the fool will be servant to the wise." (Prov 11:29)

This proverb, as previously mentioned, was the inspiration for the classic play "Inherit the Wind" about the famous Scopes "monkey trial" by Jerome Lawrence and Robert Edwin Lee.

The theology of proverbs is simple but not simplistic, it is illuminating in a very straightforward way:

"The fruit of the righteous is a tree of life,
    and the one who is wise saves lives.
31 If the righteous receive their due on earth,
    how much more the ungodly and the sinner!" (Prov. 11:30-31).

How we long as a people to once more taste and be blessed by the Tree of Life. We first saw this tree in Eden (Gen 2:9), and we see it again in Revelation, in the new heaven and earth that we are promised by God Himself (Rev. 22:1-2).

A wife of "noble character"- a true and priceless treasure given to man by God. What could surpass this gift, at last on the earth? We see this same theme later in the epilogue to Proverbs- Proverbs 31 in which we have a full description of the chcracter and attributes of such a godly woman. God has certainly blessed me with a wife like this, and she is my greatest treasure on the earth! The proverbs teach us:

"A wife of noble character is her husband's crown,
    but a disgraceful wife is like decay in his bones.
5 The plans of the righteous are just,
    but the advice of the wicked is deceitful." (Prov 12:4-5)

The heart is deceitful – above all else (Jer. 17:9), and the heart of a fool is one that leads them in ways that seem right (see Judges 21:25) but that lead to destruction:

"The way of fools seems right to them,
    but the wise listen to advice.
16 Fools show their annoyance at once,
    but the prudent overlook an insult." (Prov. 12:15-16)

Proverbs 12 closes with a commentary on the "lazy" as well as a description of the life that the righteous both live and can expect with the Lord forever:

"The lazy do not roast any game,
    but the diligent feed on the riches of the hunt.
28 In the way of righteousness there is life;
    along that path is immortality." (Prov. 12:27-28).

1 Corinthians 15:33-58

Paul knows his listeners and the hearers of his letter are vitally interested in the resurrection. What greater future could we look forward to than being in a "continuous" and everlasting life- especially in Heaven where we are unhindered by sin and in the constant presence of the Lord? Paul teaches the believers in Corith about the resurrection and the bodies we are to inhabit: 35 *"But someone will ask, "How are the dead raised? With what kind of body will they come?" 36 How foolish! What you sow does not come to life unless it dies. 37 When you sow, you do not plant the body that will be, but just a seed, perhaps of wheat or of something else. 38 But God gives it a body as he has determined, and to each kind of seed he gives its own body. 39 Not all flesh is the same: People have one kind of flesh, animals have another, birds another and fish another. 40 There are also heavenly bodies and there are earthly bodies; but the splendor of the heavenly bodies is one kind, and the splendor of the earthly bodies is another. 41 The sun has one kind of splendor, the moon another and the stars another; and star differs from star in splendor. 42 So will it be with the resurrection of the dead. The body that is sown is perishable, it is raised imperishable; 43 it is sown in dishonor, it is raised in glory; it is sown in weakness, it is raised in power; 44 it is sown a natural body, it is raised a spiritual body. If there is a natural body, there is also a spiritual body. 45 So it is written: "The first man Adam became a living being"[f]; the last Adam, a life-giving spirit. 46 The spiritual did not come first, but the natural, and after that the spiritual. 47 The first man was of the dust of the earth; the second man is of heaven. 48 As was the earthly man, so are those who are of the earth; and as is the heavenly man, so also are those who are of heaven. 49 And just as we have borne the image of the earthly man, so shall we[g] bear the image of the heavenly man. 50 I declare to you, brothers and sisters, that flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable."* (1 Cor. 15:35-50)

There are several key teachings in this passage: 1) we will change after our physical death- our new bodies will be "different" just as Jesus' was after His resurrection; 2) the new body will be "imperishable"; 3) the new body is a "spiritual body"; 4) Jesus is the "second Adam"- the "last Adam" described in verse 45; 4) we will bear the image of the heavenly Man- Jesus!

The chapter then comes to a glorious conclusion…death has been swallowed up, conquered and replaced with eternal life- all because of the sacrifice of the Son fo all of us: *"Listen, I tell you a mystery: We will not all sleep, but we will all be changed— 52 in a flash, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed. 53 For the perishable must clothe itself with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality. 54 When the perishable has been clothed with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality, then the saying that is written will come true: "Death has been swallowed up in victory."[h]*

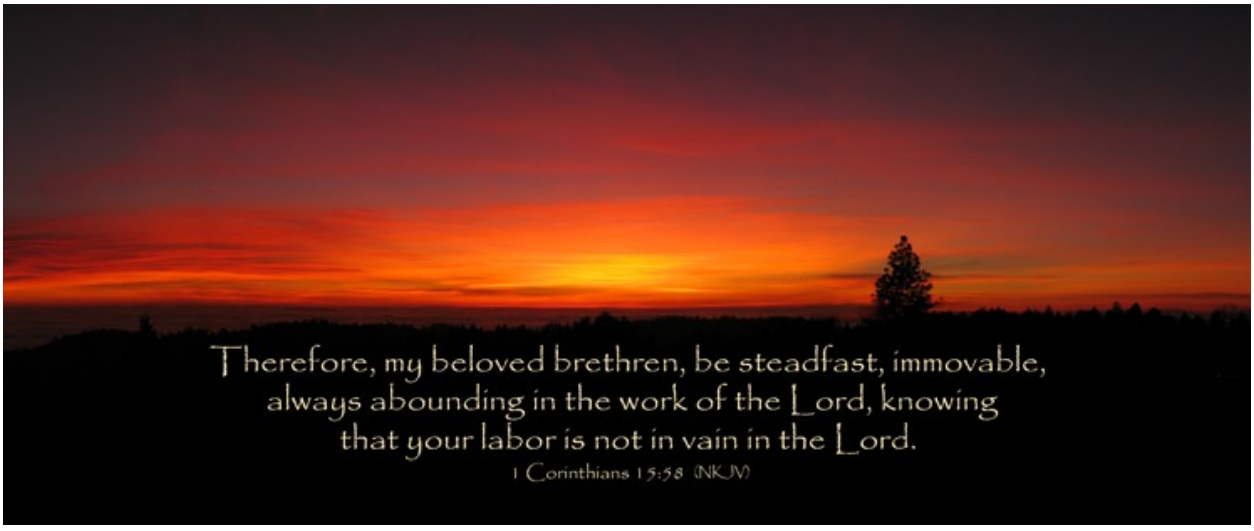
55 "Where, O death, is your victory?

Where, O death, is your sting?"[i]

56 The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. 57 But thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ." (1 Cor. 15:51-57).

Some have wondered- “what exactly happens when we die?” The Biblical answer is that we will be counted among those who have “fallen asleep in Christ” (1 Cor. 15:18; 1 Thess.4:13-14). And when we wake we will see Him. My personal belief is that just as God is “ouside of time” we will be also- and the passing of “time” will no longer have meaning for us. It will be– I believe- as if we fell asleep and then awoke from a dreamless sleep into the very presence of the Lord! I pray that I will no more fear death than I fear falling asleep- confident that when I wake I will be in God’s presence! Please see Spurgeon’s inspiring sermon on this topic (http://www.spurgeongems.org/vols46-48/chs2659.pdf)

And what is the conclusion? “Nothing” will move or shake us. We are children of the King, saved fro His sake and confident of our place in His eternal family, free to give ourselves fully to Him: *“Therefore, my dear brothers and sisters, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain.”* (1 Cor. 15:58).



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Proverbs 13-14 September 8, 2014 1 Corinthians 16

The tongue, James writes, is a powerful force. When used for evil, it is the source of heartbreak, slander, and broken relationships: *“Likewise, the tongue is a small part of the body, but it makes great boasts. Consider what a great forest is set on fire by a small spark. The tongue also is a fire, a world of evil among the parts of the body. It corrupts the whole body, sets the whole course of one’s life on fire, and is itself set on fire by hell. All kinds of animals, birds, reptiles and sea creatures are being tamed and have been tamed by mankind, but no human being can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison.”* (James 3:5-8) Solomon makes similar comments in Proverbs 13 in his teaching about language- here using the symbol of the lips:

“From the fruit of their lips people enjoy good things,
but the unfaithful have an appetite for violence.
Those who guard their lips preserve their lives,
but those who speak rashly will come to ruin.” (Proverbs 13:2-3)

Investors would be wise to follow the advice of Proverbs 13:11. Some are rash and reckless, trying to "get rich quick". Most successful investors take a measured approach, and focus on the returns over the long run:

"Dishonest money dwindles away,
but whoever gathers money little by little makes it grow." (Proverbs 13:11)

Two things are taught in Proverbs 13:23-24, verse 23 teaches about the use of "unplowed fields" to feed the poor, while verse 24 addresses the issue of disciplining children. Verse 13 can be interpreted in several ways, as can much of the Scripture. This is not to say that we can "explain" or "fully interpret" any Scripture- there is always an element of mystery in any of the Spirit's writings that eludes our limited mind and experience. The best and most productive way to interpret Scripture is to allow it to interpret itself. Parallel passages on the same topic often illuminate our understanding. In this case, we remember the lovely story of Ruth, where the "gleanings" from a field were her sustenance for a while (Ruth 2:23). The commentary is helpful here, pointing out that several renderings of the Hebrew suggest that the word rendered "unplowed" in the NIV could also be ranslated "worked for the first time" (http://biblehub.com/proverbs/13-23.htm) . Regardless of the exact translation, Solomon is setting a contrast in that which "could be" – in this case food for the poor, and that which often "is" which is the injustice that robs the poor, and in fact robe everyone. Similar issues arise in interpreting Proverbs 13:24, in which discipline for a child is described. We parents would also be well seved to read this verse (verse 24) in parallel with Ephesians 6:4 "Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord.". The focus is on love and discipline, as the Scripture teaches us that is how God disciplines us (Heb 12;6). The proverbs are:

"An unplowed field produces food for the poor,
but injustice sweeps it away.
Whoever spares the rod hates their children,
but the one who loves their children is careful to discipline them." (Prov. 13:23-24)

Proverbs 24 is another "treasure tove" of wisdom. Among the many topics covered are: 1) how to put a strong foundation in your family and home (verse 1); 2) the value of an honest witness, on which our system of justice is based (verse 5); 3) a comparison of the wisdom of the "prudent" and the deception and self deception of the "fools" (verse 8); 4) a warning against following "our way" as opposed to God's way (verse 12); 5) a warning against being "quick tempered" (verse 17); 6) teaching about kindness to a neighbor (verse 21); and 7) the "fortress" that God builds around those who put their trust in Him (verse 26).

The genius of these proverbs is that they are truly timeless- human nature has not changed since the writing of these proverbs, and the wisdom of seeking God's counsel and direction endures for all time:

The wise woman builds her house,
but with her own hands the foolish one tears hers down. (Proverbs 14:1)
An honest witness does not deceive,
but a false witness pours out lies. (Proverbs 14:5)
The wisdom of the prudent is to give thought to their ways,

but the folly of fools is deception. (Proverbs 14:8)
There is a way that appears to be right,
but in the end it leads to death. (Proverbs 14:12)
A quick-tempered person does foolish things,
and the one who devises evil schemes is hated. (Proverbs 14:17)
It is a sin to despise one's neighbor,
but blessed is the one who is kind to the needy. (Proverbs 14:21)
Whoever fears the Lord has a secure fortress,
and for their children it will be a refuge. (Proverbs 14:26)

1 Corinthians 16

Christians have always helped one another, and the church in Corinth was no exception. Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 16 about an offering, collected weekly, that is to be accumulated and sent to Jerusalem. We can safely imply from this passage that there wa a pressing need ion the Jerusalem church, and that Paul was encouraging generosity among God's people. This tradition of giving for urgent needs is well established and continues today in a vast variety of forms: *"Now about the collection for the Lord's people: Do what I told the Galatian churches to do. On the first day of every week, each one of you should set aside a sum of money in keeping with your income, saving it up, so that when I come no collections will have to be made. Then, when I arrive, I will give letters of introduction to the men you approve and send them with your gift to Jerusalem."* (1 Cor. 16:1-3)

Paul was certainly strong and courageous, but he was humble enough to seek help and support from the people wherever he went. A truly strong person is wise as to their needs and will take care of them as a part of stewardship: "*After I go through Macedonia, I will come to you—for I will be going through Macedonia. Perhaps I will stay with you for a while, or even spend the winter, so that you can help me on my journey, wherever I go."* (1 Cor. 16:5-6).

The apostle then makes a series of personal requests, mostly out of his concerns for fellow workers Timothy (verses 10-11) and Apollos (verse 12). He then gives us a strong admonition, an expression of his love for the church: *"Be on your guard; stand firm in the faith; be courageous; be strong. Do everything in love."* (1 Cor. 16:13-14). He loves the church and wants only good things for them, just as God loves us and wants the very best for all His children.

Paul then in his final words in his letter, reminds the church in Corinth that they are not alone- they are part of a loving network of believers that pray for, work for, are generous to, and in may other ways support each other: *"The churches in the province of Asia send you greetings. Aquila and Priscilla greet you warmly in the Lord, and so does the church that meets at their house. All the brothers and sisters here send you greetings. Greet one another with a holy kiss. I, Paul, write this greeting in my own hand. If anyone does not love the Lord, let that person be*

cursed! Come, Lor! The grace of the Lord Jesus be with you. My love to all of you in Christ Jesus. Amen" (1 Cor. 16:19-24)

Proverbs 15, 16 September 9, 2014 2 Corinthians 1

I am often called on to be a "peacemaker" at my place of work as a department chair in a local college- trying to calm down an angry student or colleague or to resolve a difficulty between two persons. The proverb states:

A gentle answer turns away wrath,
but a harsh word stirs up anger. (Proverbs 15:1)

In many cases, if I engaged in frustration or anger myself, or "took sides" and was harshly critical, I would be pouring "gasoline on a fire"! Instead I remember the wosdom in the proverb and many times, with God's help, can defuse or de-escalate a controversy or issue.

One of the reasons that many folks don't believe in a God of judgment, or don't acknowledge His authority, is that they do not want to be accountable for the thoughts and actions. This proverb reminds us that God is omnipresent, and that He is keeping account of us:

"The eyes of the Lord are everywhere,
keeping watch on the wicked and the good." (Proverbs 15:3)

I thank God that I am covered by the blood of the Son, and that my sins are "forgiven and forgotten (Psalm 103:12).

Jesus taught us much about true righteousness in His ministry, perhaps the most important lessons about "right living" started with an admission of our own sin and guilt, as opposed to "puffed up" self righteousness. This was clearly one of the key points in the parable Jesus told of the prayers of two very different people- the proud hearted self-righteous Pharisee who prayed loudly in public and the heartbroken, humble and honest prayer of the publican*: "To some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everyone else, Jesus told this parable: "Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood by himself and prayed: 'God, I thank you that I am not like other people—robbers, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.' "But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, 'God, have mercy on me, a sinner.' "I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. For all those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted."* (Luke 18:9-14)

This proverb teaches the same great truth, but the identity and nature of the one truly righteous is the reverse of what we might think:

The Lord detests the sacrifice of the wicked,
but the prayer of the upright pleases him. (Proverbs 15:8)

The sacrifice of the wicked in the case of Jesus' parable was the attitude and "false prayer", the true prayer – the prayer of the upright-was that offered by the Publican! The "last shall be first, and the first the last" (Matthew 20:16)

The comic genius Robin Williams, who tragically took his own life just recently, gave a memorable portrayal of the real life Dr. Hunter “Patch” Adams in the well liked film “Patch Adams”. The doctor’s guiding philosophy was that the environment of a patient is critical to their survival and wellness- so Dr. Adams often dressed ans acted as a “clown” to bring joy and cheer to his patients, many who were children from troubled or disadvantaged backgrounds. This proverb holds up the great truth that a “cheerful heart” is a valuable possession:

“A happy heart makes the face cheerful,
but heartache crushes the spirit.” (Proverbs 15:13)

The last two proverbs in this cahper hold up the virtues of discipline- especially self-discipline, and wisdom that starts with “fear”-respect, awe- of the Lord:

“Those who disregard discipline despise themselves,
but the one who heeds correction gains understanding.
Wisdom’s instruction is to fear the Lord,
and humility comes before honor.” (Proverbs 15:32-33)

“Delight yourself in the Lord and He will give you the desire of your heart” (Psalm 37:4)- certainly one of my favorite passages in the Psalms. This is a parallel of the proverb we see here, which tells us that God will direct our plans and honoe them, and even provide the appropriate “outcome” for the wicked.

“Commit to the Lord whatever you do,
and he will establish your plans.
The Lord works out everything to its proper end—
even the wicked for a day of disaster.” (Proverbs 16:3-4)

Our materialistic culture seems to tell us- “greed is good” amd “more is better”, but these gains and pleasures are but for the moment- the true treasure is the righteousness that comes only from the Father:

“Better a little with righteousness
than much gain with injustice.” (Proverbs 16:8)

There are so many “practical” lessons from the proverbs. This is not surprising since Solomon spent his life pursuing righteousness, governing with wisdom and justice, and observing and learning from human nature. He gives excellent and godly advice to us on several subjects in these next proverbs- 1) god and “insight” are more precious and desirable than silver or gold (despite what precious metal investors might say); 2) life is preserved effectively by those that are upright and guard their ways- being careful to avoid the snares of evil; 3) a proud person is literally setting themselves up to fail- not a question of “if” but “when” they will fail:

“How much better to get wisdom than gold,

to get insight rather than silver!
The highway of the upright avoids evil;
those who guard their ways preserve their lives.
Pride goes before destruction,
a haughty spirit before a fall." (Proverbs 16:16-18)

Several more proverbs in this chapter have arrested my qttention this tme through the Scripture, and stimulate reflections from me:
"A perverse person stirs up conflict,
and a gossip separates close friends." (Proverbs 16:28)

"Gray hair is a crown of splendor;
it is attained in the way of righteousness." (Proverbs 16:31)

"The lot is cast into the lap,
but its every decision is from the Lord." (Proverbs 16:33)
A "perverse person" to me is one who is "entertained and stimulated" by causing strife and dissention. Such folks "live to argue and dissent". I have never understood this, but know from experience that it causes heartbreak, and separats people almost as much as the more passive "gossip" (verse 28).
Since I have had gray hair since my 40s, I am particularly pleased that God sees my hair (symbol of my age) as a "crown of splendor" and I sincerely hope that I have "attained it in the way of righteousness"

The last verse of Proverbs 16 exlores the practice of "casting lots" to determine God's will (please see http://jdryer.blogspot.com/2007/08/casting-lots-and-determining-gods-will.html).
We see it several times in the Hebrew Scriptures (Num. 33:54;Jonah 1:7). In fact the priestly garb include the Urim and Thummim for determining God's will in a particular circumstance (https://bible.org/question/how-did-urim-and-thummim-function). We see this practice in the New Tesrament also, as the selection of Matthias to replace Judas Iscariot was determined by casting lots (Acts 1:26) My humble opinion is that although God can- and does- use anything He chooses to communicate His will to us, the use of "chance" is a clear example of "putting God to the test" (Deut 6:6- quoted by Jesus to oppose Satan) and should be avoided.

2 Corinthians 1

The church at Corinth merited two letters from Paul. It is most likely that Paul wrote twice because of changes in problems and issues in the church since his first letter. Some scholars believe there were actually four letters from Paul, the first was not preserved (https://www.blueletterbible.org/study/intros/corinthi.cfm) What is now known as 2 Corinthians is actually the fourth letter written by Paul to this church.

He starts as always with a greeting to those in the church, mentioning "all the holy people in Achaia" as a reminder that they were not alone, either spiritually or geographically: *"Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and Timothy our*

brother, To the church of God in Corinth, together with all his holy people throughout Achaia: Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ." (2 Cor. 1:1-2)

The apostle then offers a tribute of praise to God- who is the God of comfort and compassion. Certainly Paul would have life experience to show him this great truth- without confridence in the God that comforts and reassures, neither we not Paul have the motivation to continue in the work of the building of the Kingdom: "*Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves receive from God. For just as we share abundantly in the sufferings of Christ, so also our comfort abounds through Christ. If we are distressed, it is for your comfort and salvation; if we are comforted, it is for your comfort, which produces in you patient endurance of the same sufferings we suffer. And our hope for you is firm, because we know that just as you share in our sufferings, so also you share in our comfort."* (2 Cor. 1:3-7)

Escape from peril, even from what seemed a "sentence of death" is then testified to by Paul. He had troubles, problems and suffering to ndure, but he is confident in the provision of God for his future*: "He has delivered us from such a deadly peril, and he will deliver us again. On him we have set our hope that he will continue to deliver us, as you help us by your prayers. Then many will give thanks on our behalf for the gracious favor granted us in answer to the prayers of many."* (2 Cor. 1:10-11). Note that Paul gives credit to the amazing power of intercessory prayer as a key factor in his success and blessings.

Paul "boasted" of very little- except God's grace- but he makes an exception here. He sincerely believes that he and his fellow workers have conducted themselves in a manne worthy of their calling, and in a way that exemplifies the truth of the Gospel: "*Now this is our boast: Our conscience testifies that we have conducted ourselves in the world, and especially in our relations with you, with integrity and godly sincerity. We have done so, relying not on worldly wisdom but on God's grace. For we do not write you anything you cannot read or understand. And I hope that, as you have understood us in part, you will come to understand fully that you can boast of us just as we will boast of you in the day of the Lord Jesus.* (2 Cor. 1:12-14)

It is certainly difficult to say both "yes" and "no" in the same sentence, and have the sentence make any logical sense. Paul, mater of language, manages to do just that in the next passage from this letter: *"But as surely as God is faithful, our message to you is not "Yes" and "No." 19 For the Son of God, Jesus Christ, who was preached among you by us—by me and Silas[c] and Timothy—was not "Yes" and "No," but in him it has always been "Yes." For no matter how many promises God has made, they are "Yes" in Christ. And so through him the "Amen" is spoken by us to the glory of God. Now it is God who makes both us and you stand firm in Christ. He anointed us, set his seal of ownership on us, and put his Spirit in our hearts as a deposit, guaranteeing what is to come."* (2 Cor. 1:18-22)

The apostle then alludes to the reason that he did not "return" to Corinth- it was because of his confidence in the faith of the church that would enable them to

"stand firm" in the faith: *"I call God as my witness—and I stake my life on it—that it was in order to spare you that I did not return to Corinth. Not that we lord it over your faith, but we work with you for your joy, because it is by faith you stand firm."* (1 Cor. 1:23-24)

Picture from SoupArt

Proverbs 17-18 September 10, 2014 2 Corinthians 2

Divorce is a horrible stain on the human spirit. God designed marriage to be a lifetime commitment. Nobody knows how destructive and painful divorce is better than someone who has endured it…and I have! The first proverb in chapter 17 is one I read many times during the "fiery trial" of a divorce:

"Better a dry crust with peace and quiet
than a house full of feasting, with strife." (Proverbs 17:1)

One of the proverbs shortly following also describes very well the "strife" verse 1 and emotional "furnace" I experienced. It was during that time that I had two choices: 1) become angry and bitter and react; 2) become more trusting and humble and build my faith. God gave me the insight and courage to make the second choice. The furnace of testing is real:

"The crucible for silver and the furnace for gold,
but the Lord tests the heart." (Proverbs 17:3)

On a more pleasant note, the Proverbs list one of the great joys in life-grandchildren. God has blessed Carol and me with four:

"Children's children are a crown to the aged,
and parents are the pride of their children." (Proverbs 17:6)

How important is forgiveness? It is so important, Jesus taught, that we are forgiven in the same measre that we forgive. I don't know about anyone else, but I want to be forgiven- over and over. So Jesus then points me to my own "forgiving behavior". It's certainly not that God doesn't love us when we don't forgive- or commit any other sin. But being unforgiving hardens our heart to the point that we cannot ACCEPT God's love and forgiveness. Lack of forgiveness can destroy even a close friendship, and love demands forgiveness:

"Whoever would foster love covers over an offense,
but whoever repeats the matter separates close friends."(Proverbs 17:9)

A fool not only misses their own opportunity to understand and give reverent attention to the laws and precepts of the Lord, but when in an "active" mode, can cause great harm to others- like a "mother bear" robbed of her cubs. Paying back evil for good is a sure recipe for lasting evil in one's own life or household:

"Better to meet a bear robbed of her cubs
than a fool bent on folly.
Evil will never leave the house
of one who pays back evil for good." (Proverbs 17:12-13)

Children can be either a great blessing or tremendous heartbreak- and in many cases they are both as they struggle to mature and accept God's love and salvation for themselves. The same child will have "seasons" in which they are a delight to their parents and their God, and then can turn to their "own ways" and cause heartache and trouble:

"To have a fool for a child brings grief;
there is no joy for the parent of a godless fool." (Proverbs 17:21).

There is an old and well-worn saying that it is "better to be thought a fool than to open your mouth and prove it". The proverbs echo a similar statement:

"Even fools are thought wise if they keep silent,
and discerning if they hold their tongues." (Proverbs 17:28)

What we say truly matters. Although what we think also matters, it is when "what we think" becomes "what we say" that we can create serious problemsn and difficulties both for ourselves an others. The prototypical "fool" in the proverbs is not a "court jester", a "clown" or someone without gifts or intelligence. They are folls because they say in thei hearts "There is no God" (Psalm 14:1), and their behavior and speech mirror this disbelief. So a "fool" says things that mirror their disbelief, and others – as well as themselves-are harmed:

"Fools find no pleasure in understanding
but delight in airing their own opinions.
The lips of fools bring them strife,
and their mouths invite a beating.
The mouths of fools are their undoing,
and their lips are a snare to their very lives." (Proverbs 18:2; 6-7)

The work ethic is held up as a standard for godliness in the proverbs:

"One who is slack in his work
is brother to one who destroys." (Proverbs 18:9)

One of my favorite “contemporary” songs (I guess those are songs written in the 20th century!) is “Blessed Be the Name of the Lord”, the verse of which is “The Name of the Lord is a strong Tower, the righteous run into it, and they are safe”. The proverb that was the inspiration for this is found here:

“The name of the Lord is a fortified tower;
the righteous run to it and are safe.” (Proverbs 18:10)

Solomon teaches us that wronging a brother or sister can have long term negative effects:

“A brother wronged is more unyielding than a fortified city;
disputes are like the barred gates of a citadel.” (Proverbs 18:19).

When my wonderful, bright and very funny friend Mike Conrad suddenly died, I used this last proverb as part of my eulogy. Mike really was like a brother, and was a true friend that I valued and thanked God for. He and I explored the Scriptures together in a weekly lunch/bible study that was the source of much blessing for me. He was a “brother” and he is still missed:

“One who has unreliable friends soon comes to ruin,
but there is a friend who sticks closer than a brother.” (Proverbs 18:24)

2 Corinthians 2

We have a clue to a “missing” letter Paul wrote before this one- the third in a series to the church in Corinth. This letter (2 Corinthians) is believed to be the fourth letter: *“So I made up my mind that I would not make another painful visit to you. For if I grieve you, who is left to make me glad but you whom I have grieved? I wrote as I did, so that when I came I would not be distressed by those who should have made me rejoice. I had confidence in all of you, that you would all share my joy. For I wrote you out of great distress and anguish of heart and with many tears, not to grieve you but to let you know the depth of my love for you.* (2 Cor. 2:1-4). It is interesting to speculate why Paul’s visit was “painful”. Was he not well-received? Did the church at Corinth reject his teaching and oppose his efforts at correction?

There was apparently an issue of “sin within the church” centered on one of the members. Paul urges the church to forgive (after he has govne through the discipline by the majority of the church) and reclaim this member into the whole body: *“If anyone has caused grief, he has not so much grieved me as he has grieved all of you to some extent—not to put it too severely. The punishment inflicted on him by the majority is sufficient. Now instead, you ought to forgive and comfort him, so that he will not be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow. I urge you, therefore, to reaffirm your love for him.”* (2 Cor. 2:5-8) Paul makes it clear that it was not his personal grief that was the issue but the grief this errant one has caused the body of believers.

Paul also suggests that for the church not to forgive places them in danger of the “schemes of Satan”. We must forgive to be forgiven ourselves: *“Anyone you forgive, I also forgive. And what I have forgiven—if there was anything to forgive—I have forgiven in the sight of Christ for your sake, in order that Satan might not outwit us. For we are not unaware of his schemes.”*(2 Cor. 2:10-11)

The apostle explains that he goes where the Spirit of God leads him, and not where he is hindered: *"Now when I went to Troas to preach the gospel of Christ and found that the Lord had opened a door for me, I still had no peace of mind, because I did not find my brother Titus there. So I said goodbye to them and went on to Macedonia."* (2 Cor. 2:12-13). Paul then uses vivid imagery of being led as "captives" in Christ's procession of triumph. This is the reverse of the usual image of captivity, where those conquered would be led before the cheering crowd of the conquering nation, and ridiculed and taunted. Here the captives are led by Jesus Himself, and are being used to spread the gospel: *"But thanks be to God, who always leads us as captives in Christ's triumphal procession and uses us to spread the aroma of the knowledge of him everywhere. For we are to God the pleasing aroma of Christ among those who are being saved and those who are perishing. To the one we are an aroma that brings death; to the other, an aroma that brings life. And who is equal to such a task? Unlike so many, we do not peddle the word of God for profit. On the contrary, in Christ we speak before God with sincerity, as those sent from God."* (2 Cor. 2:14-17). These "captives" are themselves a "pleasing aroma" (a living sacrifice) to God and are sent from God to accomplish this important work.

Proverbs 19, 20 September 11, 2014 2 Corinthians 3

One of the greatest tests of the principle "love your enemy" has been to pray fro the fundamental Islamic terrorists who ravaged our country on 9/11/2001 and left nearly 3000 Americans (and 19 terrorists) dead, and countless more traumatized. The only way to change a terrorist bent on destruction is for God to change their hearts. I have tried hard to accept the challenge of loving and praying for these folks.

I have chosen a single proverb to explore today in both chapters 19 and 20 of proverbs to explore the theme I just mentioned. It is Proverbs 19:3 in this chapter and Proverbs 20:5 in the next. There are many other wonderful bits of wisdom in these two chapters, but I will focus only on these two. I leave the rest to you as "homework"!

Here are the texts:
A person's own folly leads to their ruin,
yet their heart rages against the Lord. (Proverbs 19:3)

The purposes of a person's heart are deep waters,
but one who has insight draws them out. (Proverbs 20:5)

Folly is a set of actions based on "foolishness". Since foolishness is attributed in the Scripture as lack of faith in the true God (Psalm 14:1), we should then look at the actions of terror groups as reflective of this belief either: 1) that there is no god, or 2) belief in an idol or false god. Many have suggested that Islam is by its nature a satanic religion. It holds to the 7 pillars as fundamental beliefs (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Seven_pillars_of_Ismailism), as listed by Wikipedia as follows:

Guardianship ·
Purity ·
Shahada · (the "oneness" of God)
Prayer ·
Charity ·
Fasting ·
Pilgrimage

Some sects add “jihad”, translated as “The Struggle”, and it is here that some of the controversy and political/social issues find their focus.

Any “religion” created by man to organize and systematize belief and worship, has the opportunity for error and wrong emphasis. God is not as interested in “religion” as He is the rebuilding of our hearts and the ministries of the Holy Spirit in the family of believers. The Christian “religion” is certainly not exempt from error and extremism. Some of the more horrific examples of extremism in the history of the Christian church are the Inquisitions, where unbelievers were “tortured into believing” and the crusades, particularly the children’s crusade which took place about 1212 (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Children's_Crusade).

In the case of Islam, the major criticisms revolve around “jihad”, which has been used by proponents of the believers of Isalm to justify horrific acts against non Islam neighbors to “kill or convert them”, some with the goal of establishing a world wide caliphate with Sharia Law as the center of all human interactions (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Worldwide_Caliphate; http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sharia). The violent attacks against non-Isalmic “neighbors” is the source of much of the controversy in this case. Extremists have taken the religion of Isalm, and molded it into an instrument of politics, hate and intolerance, and warfare.

Let’s look at these two proverbs in this light, first Proverbs 19:3. In light of the previous discussion, the “folly” of Isalmic fundamentalists is their belief in a god – Allah- who demands sacrifice and insists on “oneness”. One observer put it this way- Allah expects you to sacrifice your sons, the God of Christianity sacrificed His Son for you! Allah is to me at the least an idol, and at the worst a cruel taskmaster. So the one following Islam is “foolish” and their foolishness leads to disaster and ruin (insert latest act of terror here) but the hearts of the “true believers” rage against God. They simply can’t understand why their twisted visions don’t become reality!

The second proverb describes the depth of one’s heart and states that the “purposes” (motivations and thinking processes) are “deep”. This is certainly the case for me- I cannot fathom- and probably don’t want to fathom- the thinking of extremists of any stripe. Yet we believe- and in some cases have experienced- the “decoding” of the mysteries of the heart and mind by the God of the universe, who created the heart and mind! God is truly the “one who has insight”!

2 Corinthians 3

In my present position I am called on to write letters of recommendation, both for students and fellow faculty/coworkers. These leters are meant to be a reflection of the positive and helpful qualities and skills that a person possesses, and that would be useful in detrmining qualifications for a scholarship, admission into a program of study, or suitablility for a position. Paul writes to the church in Corinth that his "letters" are the believers that he and God have reached and started on the journey of transformation by the Spirit: *"You yourselves are our letter, written on our hearts, known and read by everyone. You show that you are a letter from Christ, the result of our ministry, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts."* (2 Cor. 3:2-3)

Proper credit is given to God and the Spirit- the apostle fully realizes that he is a co-laborer with God and not the source of anything good himself: *"Not that we are competent in ourselves to claim anything for ourselves, but our competence comes from God. He has made us competent as ministers of a new covenant—not of the letter but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life."* (2 Cor. 3:5-6)

The comparison is then made between the "glory" that surrounded Moses and the Law when it was give, and the present glory of the Holy Spirit. Paul relates the "dullness" of the minds of the Jews- their inability to "see" the truth as being due to a "veil" like the one Moses wore and the transient nature of that glory. We can truly see the glory of God- and it is permanent and not fleeting: *"We are not like Moses, who would put a veil over his face to prevent the Israelites from seeing the end of what was passing away. But their minds were made dull, for to this day the same veil remains when the old covenant is read. It has not been removed, because only in Christ is it taken away. Even to this day when Moses is read, a veil covers their hearts. But whenever anyone turns to the Lord, the veil is taken away. Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom."* (2 Cor. 3:13-17).

The greater glory is that we are being "transformed"- made over from the inside out (2 Cor. 5:17)- by the very Spirit of God: *"And we all, who with unveiled faces contemplate the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his image with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit."* (2 Cor. 3:18)

Proverbs 21-22 September 12, 2014 2 Corinthians 4

Sacrifice ws an integral part of the Hebrew religion. The life of any living creature (including us) is in the "blood", and "without the shedding of blood there is no remission" (Heb. 9:22 KJV). The sacrifice in the time of the Old Testament involved slaughter of sheep, bulls, goats "without blemish" (it wouldn't be much of a sacrifice to thin the herd of crippled or diseased animals) and sprinkling or spashing the bllod on the altar. This "covered" sin but did not lead to true forgiveness of sin- that had to wait until the Lamb of God was sacrificed. Two proverbs in chapter 21 deal with this theme of sacrifice:

To do what is right and just
is more acceptable to the Lord than sacrifice. (Prov 21:3)

The sacrifice of the wicked is detestable—
how much more so when brought with evil intent! (Prov. 21:27)

The first proverb is a parallel to the passage in Hosea 6:6 and Matthew 9:13- *"But go and learn what this means: 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.'* For I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners." (Matthew 9:13, quoting Hosea 6:6). The desire of God is not that we "sacrifice"- which can be done as a ritual with no real depth of meaning, but that we show love and mercy to our fellow travelers on this earth. Doing what is "right and just" is to show that we truly value God's mercy to us, and is a key part of our witness to others. The "sacrifice of the wicked" is just that- surface activity that bears little inner fruit. The heart of the wicked remains full of evil, despite the "correct behavior". God is not please with such "show"…he desires real substance from us- an is worthy of it!

Proverbs 22 contains the beginning of "30 sayings" of the wise, starting with verse 17 and "saying 1". There are also a few proverbs before this one that I will reflect on:

Humility is the fear of the Lord;
its wages are riches and honor and life.(Proverbs 22:4)

Start children off on the way they should go,
and even when they are old they will not turn from it. (Proverbs 22:6)

The rich rule over the poor,
and the borrower is slave to the lender. (Proverbs 22:7)

Folly is bound up in the heart of a child,
but the rod of discipline will drive it far away. (Proverbs 22:15)

Humility is a great virtue, often overlooked for the more "outward" gifts and graces. A truly humble person leads a life characterized by gratitude for grace, a right vision of him or herself – not "thinking too much" (or too little) of yourself" (Romans 12:3), and a clear understanding of the amazing power, righteousness and justice of God the Creator of all. The "riches" described in Proverbs 22:4 are the riches that are truly eternal- love, grace and the abiding presence of a God who loves us, keeps His promises.

Riches of a material sort are metioned in Proverbs 22:7. This is one of Dave Ramsey's favorite verses, as he teaches folks to live "debt free". The rich do have a great advantage that their wealth provides, and those who borrow foolishly are sometimes ensnared in debt. This can be a hindrance to real Christian freedom to follow where God leads. It's hard to "floow" when we are required to wotk to pay our obligations.

Proverbs 22:6 and 15 both teach about child rearing. Just today I heard a report of a professional football player being charged with "child abuse" for spanking his child. Where has common sense- and belief in discipline- loving discipline- one? Are we so "poltically correct" that we cannot discipline our own children according to God's teaching? What a sad and sick world we live in! The purpose of discipline (verse 15) is to properly raise a child in the fear of the Lord, and thus give them the lifetime gift of their own faith discovery. Right thinking lead to right actions!

The last part of Proverbs 22 is the beginning of "30 Wise Sayings". The second is of particular interest to me (verses 22-23:

"Do not exploit the poor because they are poor
and do not crush the needy in court,
23 for the Lord will take up their case
and will exact life for life." (Prov. 22:22-23)

Those who explot the poor, and do not give them justice in the court system, are particularly despicable. Their attitude basically says that justice can be "bought and sold". This attitude undermines public morality, and the very fabric of a moral society. All of us are entitled to protection under the law, just as all of us, however humble, are entitled to the opportunity to experience God's grace and mercy.

2 Corinthians 4

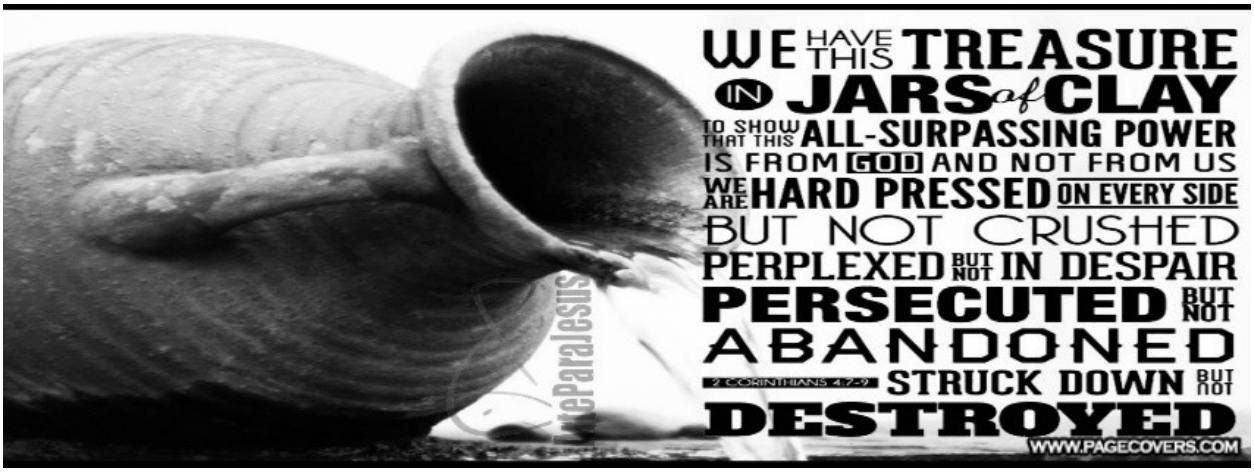
Ministers, evangelists, teachers should all "tell the truth". We are never to use "deception". smooth talk or extravagant (and unkept) promises to win our listeners

hearts and minds. Paul testifies here that he and his coworkers have been persons of integrity: *"Therefore, since through God's mercy we have this ministry, we do not lose heart. 2 Rather, we have renounced secret and shameful ways; we do not use deception, nor do we distort the word of God. On the contrary, by setting forth the truth plainly we commend ourselves to everyone's conscience in the sight of God."* (2 Cor. 4:1-2). Paul knows that not all will understand or receive his message, in fact in another letter he states that the gospel is "foolishness" to the unbeliever (1 Cor. 1:18) or the "perishing" who refuse to accept God's gift of love and forgiveness: *And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing. 4 The god of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers, so that they cannot see the light of the gospel that displays the glory of Christ, who is the image of God.* (2 Cor. 4:3-4).

Paul does not preach himself or about himself, but preaches Jesus: *For what we preach is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, and ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake. 6 For God, who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of God's glory displayed in the face of Christ.* (2 Cor. 4:5-6)

What follows is one of the truly enduring images in my spiritual life. I have heard this teaching for many years, and it continues to resonate with me in new ways each time I consider it: But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us." A contemporary Christian group even took the name "Jars of Clay" inspired by this verse. We are very fraigile, but carry precious things inside us…we are privileged to have the very Spirit of God dwell in and within us! *"But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us."* (2 Cor. 4:7).

The triumphant conclusion of this chapter shows Paul's deep understanding and appreciation of the work he is doing and the direction that God is taking his life. He is grateful for the imperishable glory that will be his: *"Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. 17 For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. 18 So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen, since what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal."* (2 Cor. 4:16-18)



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Proverbs 23-24 September 13, 2014 2 Corinthans 5

Of the "30 sayings" preserved for us in Proverbs, I especially like saying 8:
"Do not wear yourself out to get rich;
do not trust your own cleverness.
Cast but a glance at riches, and they are gone,
for they will surely sprout wings
and fly off to the sky like an eagle." (Proverbs 23:4-5)
It's almost like Solomon is saying to us- "I have been rich, and riches is fleeting." Even though he retained both wealth and power, Solomon was in the unique position to say about wealth/money "easy come- easy go!"

I also connect strongly to saying 11:
"Do not move an ancient boundary stone
or encroach on the fields of the fatherless,
for their Defender is strong;
he will take up their case against you. (Proverbs 23:10-11).
Boundaries were especially important in a time and place where one's wealth was to a great degree determined by land holdings. Mving a boundary stone was the moral equivalent of stealing land, nd this act would not go unnoticed by a moral and ever-watching God.

Family life has always been important- the vety building block of society. When families are filled with strife, selfishness and the pursuit of questionable goals, there is much suffering. When all love, respect each other, and work together for the good of all, there is much to rejoice about. I am reminded of the line from Shakespeare's King Lear, where Lear reflects on the hurt he feels from a spiteful and ungrateful child *"How sharper than a serpent's tooth it is*
To have a thankless child!" (King Lear, Act 1, Scene 4). The saying (saying 17) is:
"Listen to your father, who gave you life,
and do not despise your mother when she is old.
Buy the truth and do not sell it—
wisdom, instruction and insight as well.
The father of a righteous child has great joy;
a man who fathers a wise son rejoices in him.
May your father and mother rejoice;
may she who gave you birth be joyful!" (Proverbs 23:22-25)
Would that there were much more joy in all our families- mine included!

Saying 19 descibes the perils of drink. It is important to realize that the sin from a Scriptural standpoint is drunkenness, not in drinking wine (or other spirits) themselves:
Who has woe? Who has sorrow?
Who has strife? Who has complaints?

Who has needless bruises? Who has bloodshot eyes?
Those who linger over wine,
who go to sample bowls of mixed wine.
Do not gaze at wine when it is red,
when it sparkles in the cup,
when it goes down smoothly!
In the end it bites like a snake
and poisons like a viper.
Your eyes will see strange sights,
and your mind will imagine confusing things.
You will be like one sleeping on the high seas,
lying on top of the rigging.
"They hit me," you will say, "but I'm not hurt!
They beat me, but I don't feel it!
When will I wake up
so I can find another drink?" (Proverbs 23:29-35- saying 19)

The story gos that a teetotaler ws on a rampage at a party, condemining soundly and loudly the evils of drink. Finally one of the guests could stand it no more. "Our dear Lord Jesus drank wine" he said. The teetotaler replied "Yes, but I would think more of Him if He hadn't"!

Sayings 20 and 21 define opposite part of the spectrum of behavior:

"Do not envy the wicked,
do not desire their company;
for their hearts plot violence,
and their lips talk about making trouble." (Provebs 24:1-2 saying 20)

"By wisdom a house is built,
and through understanding it is established;
through knowledge its rooms are filled
with rare and beautiful treasures."(Proverbs 24:3-4 saying 21).

The wicked may believe they have "wisdom" and may be "wise as serpents" but they fall short of Jesus' mandate to also be "innocent as doves" (Matthew 10:16) True wisdom builds and is a contributer to understanding and godly knowledge- wickedness is destructive and leads to death- either physical, spitritual or both.

Saying 29 addresses the temptation we sometimes face to "envy the wicked"- especially if they seem helthy, happy and prosperous. Why hasn't God blessed us?, we might ask. But the ways of the wicked may be pleasant for a while, but they are ultimately destructive and lead to sorrow:

"Do not fret because of evildoers
or be envious of the wicked,
for the evildoer has no future hope,
and the lamp of the wicked will be snuffed out." (Proverbs 24:19-20 saying 29)

In closing this chapter of Proverbs, Solomon addresses some of the inevitable outcomes of laziness and "sloth". The experience and wisdom God has given Solomon allows him to see the bitter fruit that laziness bears:

"I went past the field of a sluggard,
past the vineyard of someone who has no sense;
thorns had come up everywhere,
the ground was covered with weeds,
and the stone wall was in ruins.
I applied my heart to what I observed
and learned a lesson from what I saw:
A little sleep, a little slumber,
a little folding of the hands to rest—
and poverty will come on you like a thief
and scarcity like an armed man." (Proverbs 24:30-34)

2 Corinthians 5

We're going to get a new body! God has promised us that the bodies that we presently inhabit- which age, become diseased, lose their strength and minds that become dulled- all these traits will disappear in the "new home" that God has promised us. Paul reminds the Corinthians that this "earthly tent" is a perishable one: *"For we know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, an eternal house in heaven, not built by human hands. Meanwhile we groan, longing to be clothed instead with our heavenly dwelling, because when we are clothed, we will not be found naked. For while we are in this tent, we groan and are burdened, because we do not wish to be unclothed but to be clothed instead with our heavenly dwelling, so that what is mortal may be swallowed up by life."* (2 Cor. 5:1-4).

Then comes an incredible and wonderful statement of revealed truth- God has given us the Spirit- His Spirit- to inhabit us and serve as a "deposit" that gurantees our eternal life with Him: "*Now the one who has fashioned us for this very purpose is God, who has given us the Spirit as a deposit, guaranteeing what is to come."* (2 Cor. 5:5). What a promise! We don't have to wonder or wait, or debate with ourselves if this great promise is true- we have strong and obvious evidence of God's promise literally living within us.

Just as God credited Abram's faith to him as righteousness (Gen 15:6), we live by faith- not by sight, and our faith leads us to eternal life. We will be judged for our actions- and are accountable for them, but the presence of Jesus the Son and the Sprit as our Advocate will provide our entrance into God's very presence forever: *"For we live by faith, not by sight. We are confident, I say, and would prefer to be away from the body and at home with the Lord. So we make it our goal to please him, whether we are at home in the body or away from it. For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each of us may receive what is due us for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad."* (2 Cor. 5:7-10)

The reason we can have confidence at the Judgment is that God has already done for us what we could not do for ourselves, or do ourselves- reconcile the world to Him. We were broken- and the world is broken- and separated fom God by sin. Yet He has bridged the gap and given us a lifeline, and literally remade us from within: *So from now on we regard no one from a worldly point of view. Though we once regarded Christ in this way, we do so no longer. Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting people's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation*. (2 Cor. 5:16-19). We are, as verse 17 of this passage attests, "new creature" in Christ. Thank God that he is in the rebuilding and remaking/reclaiming business!

What is our proper response? We must/should/ought/will by God's help become "ambassadors" for Him. Remember that an ambassador lives in another country foreign to them and is there to represent another nation. We are God's ambassadors in that we are "in the world but not of the world" (John 17:16 Romans 12:2) and represent God's love and forgiveness to a dying and desperate world. We can do no less in response to His amazing grace and forgiveness: *"We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God. God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God."* (2 Cor. 5:20-21)

Proverbs 25-27 September 14, 2014 2 Corinthians 6

Jesus taught us many lessons about living in the Kingdom. Some of the lessons I take to heart most often have to do with humility- not thinking more of myself or my abilities than I should, and not falling into the sin of pride (one of the 7 deadly sins, and Satan's "presenting" sin!). Jesus told a story about attending a banquet, and deliberately not taking the "place of honor" (Luke 14:7-11). The proverb here reminds us of this same truth:

"Do not exalt yourself in the king's presence,
and do not claim a place among his great men;
it is better for him to say to you, "Come up here,"
than for him to humiliate you before his nobles." (Proverbs 25:6-7)

One of my goals as an employee and coworker is to be a contributer, not a detractor, and to try to make everyone happy to see me and not sorry that I showed up for work. I have told many of the folks I work for that one of my main jobs is always to "make their life easier and make them look good". This attitude has served me well- after all, we are to work as "unto the Lord" (Col. 3:23). This proverb reminds us of the satisfaction a reliable and trustworthy employee can bring to his supervisor:

"Like a snow-cooled drink at harvest time
is a trustworthy messenger to the one who sends him;
he refreshes the spirit of his master." (Proverbs 25:13)

Solomon also warns us, in poetic and colorful imagery about: 1) false testimony; 2) the unrealiablity of the "unfaithful"; and 3) the one who "sings songs" to a heavy

heart- one who tries to comfort those suffering but inintentionally adds to their pain instead of alleviating it:

"Like a club or a sword or a sharp arrow
is one who gives false testimony against a neighbor.
Like a broken tooth or a lame foot
is reliance on the unfaithful in a time of trouble.
Like one who takes away a garment on a cold day,
or like vinegar poured on a wound,
is one who sings songs to a heavy heart." (Prov. 25:18-20)

Jesus reminded us how important it is to "pray for our enemies" (Matthew 5:43-45a; Luke 6:27-28), and Paul writes that we should remember that God only has the right to "exact vengeance" (Deuteronomy 32:35; Romans 12:19), but we have here still another tool in our spiritual walk to deal with 'enemies"- to literally "kill them with kindness". When we turn away an attack with a cheerful response, when we sincerely minister to those who despise us, we actually cause them pain (good pain though, the kind that can lead to repentance!). Solomon tells us:

"If your enemy is hungry, give him food to eat;
if he is thirsty, give him water to drink.
In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head,
and the Lord will reward you." (Proverbs 25:21-22)

There is a dual reward here- 1) we will heap "burning coals" on our enemy's head and 2) the Lord will reward us. Works for me!

Proverbs 26 focuses on the "actions and behavior characteristics" of one who is a "fool". We are well served to remember that the Scriptures describe a "fool" as one who says that there is "no God" (Psalm 14:1), and that in the New Testament we find Paul saying at one point that he was willing to be a "fool" for King Jesus' sake (1 Cor. 4:10). The proverbs describe to us the mishaps and problems that fools create for themselves and others around them:

"Like snow in summer or rain in harvest,
honor is not fitting for a fool.
Like a fluttering sparrow or a darting swallow,
an undeserved curse does not come to rest.
A whip for the horse, a bridle for the donkey,
and a rod for the backs of fools!
Do not answer a fool according to his folly,
or you yourself will be just like him.
Answer a fool according to his folly,
or he will be wise in his own eyes.
Sending a message by the hands of a fool
is like cutting off one's feet or drinking poison.
Like the useless legs of one who is lame
is a proverb in the mouth of a fool.
Like tying a stone in a sling
is the giving of honor to a fool." (Proverbs 26:1-8)

Then Solomon turns his attention to the “sluggard”- the lazy person that has a poor work ethic and is (according to Solomon) liable for poverty. I wonder what Solomon would say about our “entitlement” state today! He writes:

“A sluggard says, “There’s a lion in the road,
a fierce lion roaming the streets!”
As a door turns on its hinges,
so a sluggard turns on his bed.
A sluggard buries his hand in the dish;
he is too lazy to bring it back to his mouth.
A sluggard is wiser in his own eyes
than seven people who answer discreetly.” (Proverbs 26:13-16)

Solomon then gives us a vivid word picture of one who deceives his neighbor- certainly a practice that can cause immediate and lasting problems:

“Like a maniac shooting
flaming arrows of death
is one who deceives their neighbor
and says, “I was only joking!” (Proverbs 26:18-19)

Lastly in this chapter he describes the evil that lying and deception can cause. It is literally true that relationships, families and even nations are built on trust. Woe be to the one who violates that trust:

“Like a coating of silver dross on earthenware
are fervent lips with an evil heart.
Enemies disguise themselves with their lips,
but in their hearts they harbor deceit.
Though their speech is charming, do not believe them,
for seven abominations fill their hearts.
Their malice may be concealed by deception,
but their wickedness will be exposed in the assembly.
Whoever digs a pit will fall into it;
if someone rolls a stone, it will roll back on them.
A lying tongue hates those it hurts,
and a flattering mouth works ruin.” (Proverbs 26:23-28)

One of the greatest teachings of Jesus was to treasure the “todays” that we are given, to ask only for our “daily” bread, and to resist the impulse (or pattern) of planning or worrying excessively about our tomorrows. Jesus taught us: “Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own.” (Matthew 6:34). Almost as important as not worrying about tomorrow is not assuming that we have any say or control about even having a “tomorrow”. Solomon puts it this way:

“Do not boast about tomorrow,
for you do not know what a day may bring.” (Proverbs 27:1)

I have unfortunately learned firsthand the truth of this next proverb- my life with my first wife was tragically marred by contention and strife- I thank God that my loving wife of 30 years brings joy to me each day:

“A quarrelsome wife is like the dripping

of a leaky roof in a rainstorm;
restraining her is like restraining the wind
or grasping oil with the hand." (Proverbs 27:15-16)

Then follows a rather troubling and pessimistic (some would say brutally realistic) proverb about the fate of all who live- death itself, and the insatiable nature of our "eyes" (more correctly our hearts or spirits:

"Death and Destruction are never satisfied,
and neither are human eyes." (Proverbs 27:20)

I have a "flat place on my forehead" caused by slapping my forhead with my hand and saying- "I wish I had thought of that…how could I be so stupid?" (Just kidding about the flat place, not about the stupidity!). This little proverb caused me to think deeply about how we all handle praise. Do we let it inflate our egos or do we simply given thanks for it and give God the credit?

"The crucible for silver and the furnace for gold,
but people are tested by their praise." (Proverbs 27:21).

Lastly in tis chapter of proverbs we are taught about the fleeting natur of wealth and our obligation to be good stewards of what the Lord has entrusted us with:

"Be sure you know the condition of your flocks,
give careful attention to your herds;
for riches do not endure forever,
and a crown is not secure for all generations.
When the hay is removed and new growth appears
and the grass from the hills is gathered in,
the lambs will provide you with clothing,
and the goats with the price of a field.
You will have plenty of goats' milk to feed your family
and to nourish your female servants." (Proverbs 27:23-27)

2 Corinthians 6

There is urgency in the Gospel message! One of Dr. Billy Graham's favorite admonitions is to follow the urging of the Spirit within to make a decision to give your life to Jesus. As he so powerfully states: *"Seek the Lord while he may be found; call on him while he is near."* (Isaiah 55:6). Paul reminds us of this same truth: *"As God's co-workers we urge you not to receive God's grace in vain. For he says, "In the time of my favor I heard you, and in the day of salvation I helped you." I tell you, now is the time of God's favor, now is the day of salvation."* (2 Cor 6:1-2, quoting Isaiah 49:8) When God calls us, we are always well served to answer- and answer in the affirmative!

In an "extra long" (even for Paul) sentence the apostle reminds the Corinthians of the sufferings he and his coworkers have endured: *"We put no stumbling block in anyone's path, so that our ministry will not be discredited. Rather, as servants of God we commend ourselves in every way: in great endurance; in troubles, hardships and distresses; in beatings, imprisonments and riots; in hard work, sleepless nights and hunger; in purity, understanding, patience and kindness; in the Holy Spirit and in sincere love; in truthful speech and in the power of God; with weapons of*

righteousness in the right hand and in the left; through glory and dishonor, bad report and good report; genuine, yet regarded as impostors; known, yet regarded as unknown; dying, and yet we live on; beaten, and yet not killed; sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; poor, yet making many rich; having nothing, and yet possessing everything." (2 Cor. 6:3-10) He expresses many of the paradoxes of the Christian life- we have "nothing" but really have "everything"; we suffer "dishonor" but are among the "most honored" (my paraphrase of Paul)

The apostle ends this section (which we have later divided into a "chapter") of the letter by discussiong the perils and problems of being "yoked" with unbelievers. It is important to explore the meaning of "yoked" in this passage. A simple explanation or interpretation of the word "yoked" can mean "married to". We all know stories of the very deep problems and divisive issues between a husband or wife who is a believer who has married an unbeliever. Another interpretation comes to mind- this could simply describe a "close association" or alliance between two persons. After all, two oxen "yoked" together are joined by a common task. The Scripture is: *"Do not be yoked together with unbelievers. For what do righteousness and wickedness have in common? Or what fellowship can light have with darkness? What harmony is there between Christ and Belial? Or what does a believer have in common with an unbeliever? What agreement is there between the temple of God and idols? For we are the temple of the living God. As God has said: "I will live with them and walk among them, and I will be their God, and they will be my people." Therefore, "Come out from them and be separate, says the Lord. Touch no unclean thing, and I will receive you." And, "I will be a Father to you, and you will be my sons and daughters, says the Lord Almighty."*(2 Cor. 6:14-18 quoting Lev. 26:12; Jer. 32:38; Ezek. 37:27 Isaiah 52:11; Ezek. 20:34,41 2 Samuel 7:14; 7:8) Some Christian groups have justified their "separate lives" from the world with Scriptures like these- such as the Amish (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Amish_religious_practices)

Proverbs 28-29 September 15, 2014 2 Corinthians 7

There is nothing so courageous as a righteous and forgiven man. When Paul was faced with adversity, prison, plots against his life, and rejection by those he loved the most, he rmembered whose he was and stated *"For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain."* (Phil 1:21). How can you defeat a person like that? You simply cannot! The proverbs state simply:

"The wicked flee though no one pursues,
but the righteous are as bold as a lion." (Proverbs 28:1)

The Scriptures constantly remind us that wealth is fleeting, and that a life of righteousness bears eternal fruit. This is a lesson often lost to many, where the popularization of greed, "more" and "getting yours" are held up by media and other influential voices as virtuous and right. The Bible is very clear about this issue:

"Better the poor whose walk is blameless
than the rich whose ways are perverse." (Proverbs 28:6)

The confession of sin is a critical part of the Christian walk. We are reassured in 1 John 1:9 that: "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our

sins and purify us from all unrighteousness." The heart that "trembles before God" and is led to confess sin and obtain God's generous forgiveness is a heart growing in love, peace and joy! The proverbs state it this way:
"Whoever conceals their sins does not prosper,
but the one who confesses and renounces them finds mercy.
Blessed is the one who always trembles before God,
but whoever hardens their heart falls into trouble." (Proverbs 28:13-14)

We are told repeatedly in the Scriptures to "Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on our own understanding" (Prov 3:5), and in Romans "Live in harmony with one another. Do not be proud, but be willing to associate with people of low position.[a] Do not be conceited." (Romans 12:16). The person willing to believe, trust and obey God has discovered the secret to a well lived and joyful life. The Proverbs tell us:
"Those who trust in themselves are fools,
but those who walk in wisdom are kept safe." (Proverbs 28:26)

The entire Old Testament may be described simplistically as the "story of the lives and times of a stiff-necked people". The unfortunate truth is that some people- and nations_ remain stiff necked despite may rebukes and corrections. It's one thing to START out as "stiff-necked"- a whole thing altogether to STAY "stiff necked". The Proverbs address this character flaw in this way:
"Whoever remains stiff-necked after many rebukes
will suddenly be destroyed—without remedy." (Proverbs 29:1)
What is the real outward distinction obetween the righteous and the wicked and "evildoers"? Jesus taught us that we can't judge someone's heart, but we can "know them by their fruits" (Matt. 7:16 KJV). We can simply observe how each treats their neighbors, friends, and especially those to whom we "don't have to be nice" like waitstaff at a restaurant or maintenance workers in an office building. Solomon put it this way:
"Evildoers are snared by their own sin,
but the righteous shout for joy and are glad.
The righteous care about justice for the poor,
but the wicked have no such concern." (Proverbs 29:6-7)

Lying and corruption in :high places" is nothing new, but no more fun to contemplate or deal with now than in days past. A leader who listens to "lies" is subjecting themselves to bad advice, a wrong impression of themselves and their effectiveness (good or bad), and ultimately to suffering for the many under their direction. The Proverbs make this point clearly: *"If a ruler listens to lies, all his officials become wicked."* (Proverbs 29:12)

Finally, in this chapter Solomon makes it clear where the source of wisdom, knowledge and truth resides. We may claim- or even deceive ourselves into believing- that we are wise and worthy of honor, but the truth is that all good things come from, and have their ultimate source in, the Lord Himself: *"Fear of man will prove to be a snare, but whoever trusts in the Lord is kept safe."* (Proverbs 29:25)

2 Corinthians 7

The “holiness’ movement has a long history both in the United states and England as well as worldwide. John Wesley promulgated the theology of “perfection” and the belief that we could move toward perfection by deliberately “casting off” the sins that beset us and carefully molding our attitudes in a Godly direction. *“John Wesley's "Christian perfection" teaching—the belief that it is possible to live free of voluntary sin, and particularly by the belief that this may be accomplished instantaneously through a second work of grace.”* (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Holiness_movement). Paul writes to the Corinthians along the same lines: *“Therefore, since we have these promises, dear friends, let us purify ourselves from everything that contaminates body and spirit, perfecting holiness out of reverence for God.”* (2 Cor. 7:1). I wish I could report great success in attaining this lofty objective, the best I can report is that God is still working in me, a completely unfinished work.

Paul refers to a “sorrow” he has caused the Corinthians, presumably by his correction or rebuke. The sorrow created in this way, Paul reports, was short lived. The apostle then describes what to me is an important point of Christian teaching and doctrine- the difference between “godly sorrow” and “wordly sorrow”. He states: *“Even if I caused you sorrow by my letter, I do not regret it. Though I did regret it—I see that my letter hurt you, but only for a little while— yet now I am happy, not because you were made sorry, but because your sorrow led you to repentance. For you became sorrowful as God intended and so were not harmed in any way by us. Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret, but worldly sorrow brings death.”* (2 Cor. 7:8-10). Notice the difference- godly sorrow is sorrow over sin and can lead to repentance and forgiveness, worldly sorrow is mainly sorrow at getting caught or having one’s sins exposed.

The results of this “godly sorrow” are wonderful and worth rejoicing over! Paul adds his expression of joy for what his correction, counsel and advice have provided to the church: *“See what this godly sorrow has produced in you: what earnestness, what eagerness to clear yourselves, what indignation, what alarm, what longing, what concern, what readiness to see justice done. At every point you have proved yourselves to be innocent in this matter. So even though I wrote to you, it was neither on account of the one who did the wrong nor on account of the injured party, but rather that before God you could see for yourselves how devoted to us you are. By all this we are encouraged.”* (2 Cor. 7:11-13)

Proverbs 30-31 September 16, 2014 2 Corinthians 8

Now we see the mysterious King Agur (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Agur), who is attributed to have either written or compiled the proverbs in chapter 30. This may, as some scholars suggest, be another “fanciful” name for Solomon himself. Regardless, these are words of godly wisdom, worthy of our study. The words are written as a “statement” or teaching to a pupil, as some have suggested that Ithiel is the name of a pupil of Solomon’s:

“The sayings of Agur son of Jakeh—an inspired utterance.

This man’s utterance to Ithiel:
“I am weary, God,

but I can prevail.
Surely I am only a brute, not a man;
I do not have human understanding.
I have not learned wisdom,
nor have I attained to the knowledge of the Holy One.
Who has gone up to heaven and come down?
Whose hands have gathered up the wind?
Who has wrapped up the waters in a cloak?
Who has established all the ends of the earth?
What is his name, and what is the name of his son?
Surely you know!" (Proverbs 30:1-4)

These words sound very similar to the words God issued to Job (Job 38), and the question of who the "Son" is has been a subject of some debate. Christian scholars often point out this verse (Prov. 30:4) as a reference to Jesus, the Son of God. Agur/Solomon then testifies to the inerrant and complete perfection of the Word of God:

"Every word of God is flawless;
he is a shield to those who take refuge in him.
Do not add to his words,
or he will rebuke you and prove you a liar." (Proverbs 30:5-6).

We remember the Scripture's commentary on itself (2 Tim 3:16) as well as Jesus' warning to John on Patmos in the Revelation not to "add to or subtract from" the Word of God (Rev. 22:19) As a side note, I hope those on the various Councils that canonized the Scriptures took these words very seriously! (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Biblical_canon).

A delightful "set of lists" then follows, that illustrate the wonders of the created world, and the unexpected insight and wisdom that can be dderived from careful and wise observations:

"There are three things that are too amazing for me,
four that I do not understand:
the way of an eagle in the sky,
the way of a snake on a rock,
the way of a ship on the high seas,
and the way of a man with a young woman.
"This is the way of an adulterous woman:
She eats and wipes her mouth
and says, 'I've done nothing wrong.'
"Under three things the earth trembles,
under four it cannot bear up:
a servant who becomes king,
a godless fool who gets plenty to eat,
a contemptible woman who gets married,
and a servant who displaces her mistress.
"Four things on earth are small,
yet they are extremely wise:
Ants are creatures of little strength,
yet they store up their food in the summer;
hyraxes are creatures of little power,
yet they make their home in the crags;
locusts have no king,

yet they advance together in ranks;
a lizard can be caught with the hand,
yet it is found in kings' palaces.
"There are three things that are stately in their stride,
four that move with stately bearing:
a lion, mighty among beasts,
who retreats before nothing;
a strutting rooster, a he-goat,
and a king secure against revolt." (Proverbs 30:18-31)

One of my favorites on this list is about the "lowly lizard" that can be "caught with the hand" and "yet it is found in king's palaces" (Prov. 30:28). This reminds me of the saying "Even a cat can look at a king!" We should never be so proud, high or lifted up that we escape the very earth that we were born on! (http://idioms.thefreedictionary.com/cat+can+look+at+a+king).

This proverb closes with a comment about the "fool" that stirs up strife:

"If you play the fool and exalt yourself,
or if you plan evil,
clap your hand over your mouth!
For as churning cream produces butter,
and as twisting the nose produces blood,
so stirring up anger produces strife." (Proverbs 30:32-33)

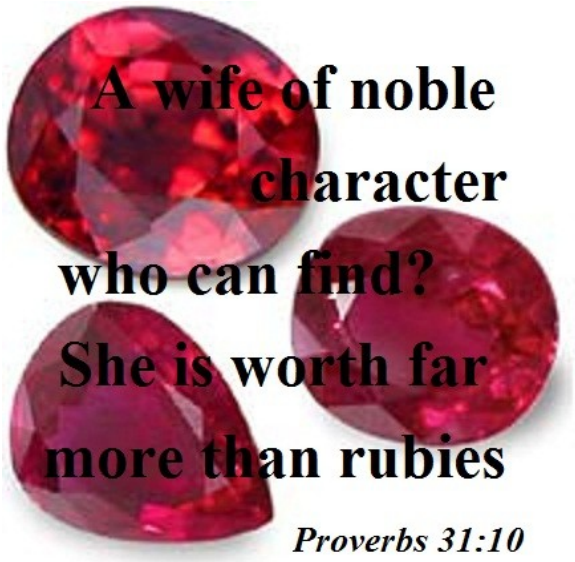
Proverbs 31 is separated into two distinct sections: 1) the "sayings of King Lemuel" (another name or pseudonym for Solomon?); and 2) the listing of the character and traits of a "Virtuous Woman".

It is not clear who "King Lemuel" is, but again his identity is secondary to the wisdom preserved here for us to read, meditate on and to be inspired and blessed by. Lemuel teaches us that it is a great virtue of a leader (or anyone for that matter) to be a champion, a defender and an advocate for those who cannot defend themselves, are poor or destitute. What noble character it is that exhibits this trait of compassion and advocacy:

"Speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves,
for the rights of all who are destitute.
9 Speak up and judge fairly;
defend the rights of the poor and needy." (Proverbs 31:8-9)

The picture painted next of the virtuous woman is a reminder to me as to how truly blessed I am to have such a godly, lovely and caring wife, whose heart is kind and beautiful! She is my greatest earthly blessing. Much like the "woman of virtue", she has worked in the "everyday business world" and acquitted herself well. She is a great gift to me, and our love grows sweeter each day. The woman described in proverbs is also a "gem":

"A wife of noble character who can find?
She is worth far more than rubies.
Her husband has full confidence in her
and lacks nothing of value.
She brings him good, not harm,
all the days of her life." (Proverbs 31:10-12).



http://nicolecrews.blogspot.com/2012/01/wife-of-noble-character.html

Note that the beginning of this woman's virtue and high standing is her "noble character"- a character molded by the Creator Himself!

"She is clothed with strength and dignity;
she can laugh at the days to come.
She speaks with wisdom,
and faithful instruction is on her tongue.
She watches over the affairs of her household
and does not eat the bread of idleness.
Her children arise and call her blessed;
her husband also, and he praises her:
"Many women do noble things,
but you surpass them all."
Charm is deceptive, and beauty is fleeting;
but a woman who fears the Lord is to be praised.
Honor her for all that her hands have done,
and let her works bring her praise at the city gate." (Proverbs 31:25-31)

Her children call her "blessed"- a great tribute from any child and clearly one earned from years of godly living and caring for her family. She is recognized by all as having greatness, and she receives (well deserved) praise from her husband. Her beauty comes from having a beautiful and caring heart! (verse 30)

2 Corinthians 8

The Macedonian church (actually churches) are held up here by paul as an example o"real generosity". He makes it clear that they were not especially "rich" by the world's standards, but that they gave from a generous spirit: *"And now, brothers and sisters, we want you to know about the grace that God has given the Macedonian churches. In the midst of a very severe trial, their overflowing joy and their extreme poverty welled up in rich generosity. For I testify that they gave as much as they were able, and even beyond their ability. Entirely on their own, they urgently pleaded with us for the privilege of sharing in this service to the Lord's*

people. And they exceeded our expectations: They gave themselves first of all to the Lord, and then by the will of God also to us." (2 Cor. 8:1-5)

Paul then reminds us (and them) that the Lord Jesus, who was "rich" in all that counted, became "poor" for us: *"I am not commanding you, but I want to test the sincerity of your love by comparing it with the earnestness of others. For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich."* (2 Cor. 8:8-9)

The church is then reminded of the "gathering of the manna" from heaven by the Hebrews as directed by God: *"The Israelites did as they were told; some gathered much, some little. And when they measured it by the omer, the one who gathered much did not have too much, and the one who gathered little did not have too little. Everyone had gathered just as much as they needed."* (Exodus 16:17-18). The principle applied here referes to the giving of the churches- they were not to give out of what they did not have, but out of what they had! *"For if the willingness is there, the gift is acceptable according to what one has, not according to what one does not have. Our desire is not that others might be relieved while you are hard pressed, but that there might be equality. At the present time your plenty will supply what they need, so that in turn their plenty will supply what you need. The goal is equality, as it is written: "The one who gathered much did not have too much, and the one who gathered little did not have too little."* (2 Cor. 8:12-15, quoting Exodus 16). The operative principle here is equality- equal sacrifice, not equal amounts!

A great compliment is then given to Titus and an unnamed "coworker", as these men have shown their trustworthiness, giftedness and enthusiasm for the gospel as they labored alongside Paul. *"Thanks be to God, who put into the heart of Titus the same concern I have for you. For Titus not only welcomed our appeal, but he is coming to you with much enthusiasm and on his own initiative. And we are sending along with him the brother who is praised by all the churches for his service to the gospel. What is more, he was chosen by the churches to accompany us as we carry the offering, which we administer in order to honor the Lord himself and to show our eagerness to help."* (2 Cor. 8:16-19). The proof of their trustworthiness? They were selected to be the ones to accompany the bringing and giving of this extravagant gift- an offering to the church, to "destitute Christians they did not even know". (https://www.biblegateway.com/resources/commentaries/IVP-NT/2Cor/Macedonian-Believers-Model)

Ecclesaistes 1-3 September 17, 2014 2 Corinthians 9

One of my most vivid memories of my undergraduate years at Georgia Tech was of the Rev. Bill Landiss, campus minister of the Wesley Foundation. He was responsible for the words that helped me see how much I wanted to be a Christian- with his statement- becoming a Christian is "doing what you have to do, and becoming the person you have to become, in light of, and in memory of what God has done in Jesus Christ!" In other words, we do what we have to do not in order to (get to heaven) but because of what He has done! He also had some very vivid illustrations in the "Christianity 101" course he presented from time to time. One was the "chatty Cathy" doll- who would utter vapid little "pollyana" sayings when

activated. He said that many Christians were like that- when threatened or confronted with pain, suffering in themselves or others, utter little “saccharine platitudes” instead of dealing with the reality before them. It was as if they didn’t think God could really handle anything difficult or troubling!

The “preacher” in Ecclesiastes is (many believe) the later and mature person that Solomon had become after he became weary of life and the reality of suffering and the seeming “meaninglessmess” or “vanity” (KJV) of so much in life. Solomon literally “had it al”, and yet wondered, as we sometimes do, what it all means. He starts this chapter with a statement about what seems to be the emptiness of all human life:

“The words of the Teacher, son of David, king in Jerusalem:

“Meaningless! Meaningless!”
says the Teacher.
“Utterly meaningless!
Everything is meaningless.”
What do people gain from all their labors
at which they toil under the sun?
Generations come and generations go,
but the earth remains forever.
The sun rises and the sun sets,
and hurries back to where it rises.
The wind blows to the south
and turns to the north;
round and round it goes,
ever returning on its course.
All streams flow into the sea,
yet the sea is never full.
To the place the streams come from,
there they return again.
All things are wearisome,
more than one can say.
The eye never has enough of seeing,
nor the ear its fill of hearing.
What has been will be again,
what has been done will be done again;
there is nothing new under the sun.
Is there anything of which one can say,
“Look! This is something new”?
It was here already, long ago;
it was here before our time.
No one remembers the former generations,
and even those yet to come
will not be remembered
by those who follow them.” (Eccles 1:1-11)

He then tells us that he has explored the depths of wisdom, and finds it meaningless as well- the more wisdom, the more suffering:

I, the Teacher, was king over Israel in Jerusalem. I applied my mind to study and to explore by wisdom all that is done under the heavens. What a heavy burden God has laid on mankind! I have seen all the things that are done under the sun; all of them are meaningless, a chasing after the wind.

What is crooked cannot be straightened;
what is lacking cannot be counted.
I said to myself, "Look, I have increased in wisdom more than anyone who has ruled over Jerusalem before me; I have experienced much of wisdom and knowledge." Then I applied myself to the understanding of wisdom, and also of madness and folly, but I learned that this, too, is a chasing after the wind.

For with much wisdom comes much sorrow;
the more knowledge, the more grief." (Eccles. 1:12-18).
Not to belabor a point made earlier about "higher critics" and authorship, Solomon has identified himself as the author twice in chapter 1 (Eccles 1:1,12). There is some discussion as to whether the last chapter (Chapter 12) has a section appended later, but in the main parts of this book there is, to me at least, no real doubt as to Solomon's authorship.

The preacher/teacher then goes on to state that "pleasure" of all kinds is also meaningless. Solomon should certainly have accumulated extensive experience with pleasure as King of Israel- he certainly should have learned a lot by experience. Yet he states:
I denied myself nothing my eyes desired;
I refused my heart no pleasure.
My heart took delight in all my labor,
and this was the reward for all my toil.
Yet when I surveyed all that my hands had done
and what I had toiled to achieve,
everything was meaningless, a chasing after the wind;
nothing was gained under the sun.(Eccles. 2:10-11)
Solomon then proceeds to say that although wisdom is greater than folly (foolishness), that the same fate overtakes both the wise person and the fool:
Then I said to myself,
"The fate of the fool will overtake me also.
What then do I gain by being wise?"
I said to myself,
"This too is meaningless."
For the wise, like the fool, will not be long remembered;
the days have already come when both have been forgotten.
Like the fool, the wise too must die!" (Eccles 2:15-16)

This would certainly be true is everyone simply died, and there was no just reward or deserved punishment after death. Solomon would have to wait until the New Covenant to see the truth about the "same fate" overtaking both!
He then tells us that "work" is also meaningless- we will only leave what we gained or accomplished to others- there is no "permanent" reward for our labors. We in the Christian faith know better…there is a reward that is eternal and wonderful!

"A person can do nothing better than to eat and drink and find satisfaction in their own toil. This too, I see, is from the hand of God, for without him, who can eat or find enjoyment? To the person who pleases him, God gives wisdom, knowledge and happiness, but to the sinner he gives the task of gathering and storing up wealth to hand it over to the one who pleases God. This too is meaningless, a chasing after the wind." (Eccles. 2:24-26)

In the beautiful poetry of Ecclesiastes 3, we see a testimony to the "timeliness" of all things. This Scripture was transformed into a contemporary song "Turn, Turn, Turn!" by Pete Seeger (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Turn!_Turn!_Turn!).
"There is a time for everything,
and a season for every activity under the heavens:
a time to be born and a time to die,
a time to plant and a time to uproot,
a time to kill and a time to heal,
a time to tear down and a time to build,
a time to weep and a time to laugh,
a time to mourn and a time to dance,
a time to scatter stones and a time to gather them,
a time to embrace and a time to refrain from embracing,
a time to search and a time to give up,
a time to keep and a time to throw away,
a time to tear and a time to mend,
a time to be silent and a time to speak,
a time to love and a time to hate,
a time for war and a time for peace." (Eccles. 3:1-8)

The teacher/preacher concludes with these words of despair:
I also said to myself, "As for humans, God tests them so that they may see that they are like the animals. Surely the fate of human beings is like that of the animals; the same fate awaits them both: As one dies, so dies the other. All have the same breath; humans have no advantage over animals. Everything is meaningless. All go to the same place; all come from dust, and to dust all return. Who knows if the human spirit rises upward and if the spirit of the animal goes down into the earth?" So I saw that there is nothing better for a person than to enjoy their work, because that is their lot. For who can bring them to see what will happen after them? (Eccles. 3:18-22)
Thanks God that life is not the meaningless exercise" that Solomon alluded to here- Jesus is the answer, the lover of my sould, and the guarantor of eternity spent in His amazing presence. His Name be ever praised!

2 Corinthians 9

The Corinthians were just reminded of the generosity of the church in Macedonia, and now they are encouraged to give generously as well. The standard is cheerful and joyous giving, not giving as a burden or with a resentful attitude: *"So I thought it necessary to urge the brothers to visit you in advance and finish the arrangements for the generous gift you had promised. Then it will be ready as a generous gift, not as one grudgingly given."* (2 Cor 9:5)

We will be blessed for our generosity, because God loves and rewards a “cheerful giver”: Remember this: *Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will also reap generously. Each of you should give what you have decided in your heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. And God is able to bless you abundantly, so that in all things at all times, having all that you need, you will abound in every good work. As it is written: “They have freely scattered their gifts to the poor; their righteousness endures forever.”* (2 Cor. 9:6-9 quoting Psalm 112:9) Jesus taught us this same principle: *“Give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together and running over, will be poured into your lap. For with the measure you use, it will be measured to you."* (Luke 6:38)

The promise is simple- just as we are forgiven as we forgive others, we are rewarded richly (though many times not monetarily) for our generosity in giving: *“You will be enriched in every way so that you can be generous on every occasion, and through us your generosity will result in thanksgiving to God.”* (2 Cor. 9:11)

The ultimate- and wonderful- result is that God will be honored and praised because of the generosity of His people: *“Because of the service by which you have proved yourselves, others will praise God for the obedience that accompanies your confession of the gospel of Christ, and for your generosity in sharing with them and with everyone else. And in their prayers for you their hearts will go out to you, because of the surpassing grace God has given you. Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift!”* (2 Cor. 9:13-15)

https://christinesbiblestudy.wordpress.com/category/corinthians/

Ecclesaistes 4-6 September 18, 2014 2 Corinthians 10

The saying goes “It would be better if they hadn’t been born”- pointing to a life of suffering, pain and neglect. The Teacher/Preacher says that for most (if not all) of us, we would be better off if we hadn’t entered the world. His words are:

“Again I looked and saw all the oppression that was taking place under the sun:

I saw the tears of the oppressed—

and they have no comforter;
power was on the side of their oppressors—
and they have no comforter.
And I declared that the dead,
who had already died,
are happier than the living,
who are still alive.
But better than both
is the one who has never been born,
who has not seen the evil
that is done under the sun." (Eccleas. 4:1-3)

The one who works hard, but has no family to share the fruits of his labor with, is also living a life that is "meaningless" according to the Teacher:

"There was a man all alone;
he had neither son nor brother.
There was no end to his toil,
yet his eyes were not content with his wealth.
"For whom am I toiling," he asked,
"and why am I depriving myself of enjoyment?"
This too is meaningless—
a miserable business!" (Eccles. 4:8)

Then in a short interlude of affirmation, the Preacher/Teacher tells us there is something goof after all- tat "two are better than one"- at least when we join together we can be of help to each other. Parts of this section are read at some weddings, to emphasize the "three strands" in a cord that are hard to break- the husband, wife, and God all together in a marriage!:

"Two are better than one,
because they have a good return for their labor:
If either of them falls down,
one can help the other up.
But pity anyone who falls
and has no one to help them up.
Also, if two lie down together, they will keep warm.
But how can one keep warm alone?
Though one may be overpowered,
two can defend themselves.
A cord of three strands is not quickly broken." (Eccles. 4:10-12)

The Teacher then returns to his former "gloom" and states that advancement is also foolishness and "meaningless": Better a poor but wise youth than an old but foolish king who no longer knows how to heed a warning. (Eccles 4:13)

Solomon then considers sacrifices and vows to God. "Let your words be few" and "fulfill your vows to God" are the cogent pieces of wisdom he shares with us:

"Guard your steps when you go to the house of God. Go near to listen rather than to offer the sacrifice of fools, who do not know that they do wrong.

Do not be quick with your mouth,
do not be hasty in your heart
to utter anything before God.
God is in heaven

and you are on earth,
so let your words be few.
A dream comes when there are many cares,
and many words mark the speech of a fool.
When you make a vow to God, do not delay to fulfill it. He has no pleasure in fools; fulfill your vow." (Eccles. 5:1-4)

The Teacher then tells us clearly- riches are meaningless. The rich "never have enough" and their posessions own them:
"Whoever loves money never has enough;
whoever loves wealth is never satisfied with their income.
This too is meaningless.
As goods increase,
so do those who consume them.
And what benefit are they to the owners
except to feast their eyes on them?
The sleep of a laborer is sweet,
whether they eat little or much,
but as for the rich, their abundance
permits them no sleep." (Eccles. 5:10-12)

Then, finally, something good and not evil: *"This is what I have observed to be good: that it is appropriate for a person to eat, to drink and to find satisfaction in their toilsome labor under the sun during the few days of life God has given them—for this is their lot. Moreover, when God gives someone wealth and possessions, and the ability to enjoy them, to accept their lot and be happy in their toil—this is a gift of God. They seldom reflect on the days of their life, because God keeps them occupied with gladness of heart."* (Eccles. 5:18-20)

Then we return to gloom and "meaninglessness" once again- nothing that is done on the earth will remain, or else the good things we accomplish we will never enjoy:
"Everyone's toil is for their mouth,
yet their appetite is never satisfied.
What advantage have the wise over fools?
What do the poor gain
by knowing how to conduct themselves before others?
Better what the eye sees
than the roving of the appetite.
This too is meaningless,
a chasing after the wind.
Whatever exists has already been named,
and what humanity is has been known;
no one can contend
with someone who is stronger.
The more the words,
the less the meaning,

and how does that profit anyone?
For who knows what is good for a person in life, during the few and meaningless days they pass through like a shadow? Who can tell them what will happen under the sun after they are gone?" (Eccles 6:9-12)

2 Corinthians 10

Some people communicate differently, and seem entirely different "in peson" than from afar or in their written words. I remember a story I was told about President Bill Clinton, who came to Georgia Tech for a conference and a colleague of mine had the opportunity for a brief "one-on-one" conversation with the president. What amazed my friend- a staunch conservative who disliked Clinton's politics- was the difference in the president when encountered "in person". He admits that Clinton was one of the most immediately "charming" and charismatic persons he ever met! What a difference from the public persona!

So it was with Paul as well. In his letters, he seemed authoritative, full of confidence and power, a true leader and an inspiration. The Corinthians claimed he was very different in person*: "By the humility and gentleness of Christ, I appeal to you—I, Paul, who am "timid" when face to face with you, but "bold" toward you when away! I beg you that when I come I may not have to be as bold as I expect to be toward some people who think that we live by the standards of this world."* (2 Cor. 10:1-2).

Paul claims that they are simplys "judging by appearances"- a sin we often commit, and that he has integrity- he is truly the same person whether communicating by letter or face-to-face*: "You are judging by appearances. If anyone is confident that they belong to Christ, they should consider again that we belong to Christ just as much as they do. So even if I boast somewhat freely about the authority the Lord gave us for building you up rather than tearing you down, I will not be ashamed of it. I do not want to seem to be trying to frighten you with my letters. For some say, "His letters are weighty and forceful, but in person he is unimpressive and his speaking amounts to nothing." 11 Such people should realize that what we are in our letters when we are absent, we will be in our actions when we are present."* (2 Cor. 10:7-11)

He contends that he and his coworkers (the "we" in this section of the letter) only were proud of what God had done through them, and were comparing what they had done only to the standards God had set before them and not simply comparing themselves to others:
"We, however, will not boast beyond proper limits, but will confine our boasting to the sphere of service God himself has assigned to us, a sphere that also includes you. We are not going too far in our boasting, as would be the case if we had not come to you, for we did get as far as you with the gospel of Christ." (2 Cor. 10:13-14). The standard is not what we "commend", but what God approves and commends: "*But, "Let the one who boasts boast in the Lord." For it is not the one who commends himself who is approved, but the one whom the Lord commends."* (2 Cor. 10:17-18)

Ecclesiastes 7-9 September 19, 2014 2 Corinthians 11:1-15

We Christians have it backwards- we should mourn and cry when a baby enters the world, and celebrate and rejoice when one of us leaves this world. (I know I'm exaggerating, but bear with me a minute). The "celebration" in a traditional New Orleans Cajun funeral, with the music, costumes, and generally lighthearted spirit, comes close to what we can look forward to- the rejoicing at our true "homecoming"! Solomon said it correctly- better to be mourning than feasting- for mourning reminds us that we have a limited number of days- and some of us might even be inspired to live like "every day is Christmas" (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Christmas_Every_Day).

"A good name is better than fine perfume,
and the day of death better than the day of birth.
2 It is better to go to a house of mourning
than to go to a house of feasting,
for death is the destiny of everyone;
the living should take this to heart." (Ecccles. 7:1-2)

Anyone who has ever done graduate work will remember that an advanced degree is really more about patience and interpersonal skills, and sophisticated "game playing" than intellect and scholarship. There were times when pursuing my doctorate that I longed to just be "finished"- and hoped that the rigorous study and research didn't "finish" me. I remember that patience was the greatest virtue of all in this setting. Solomon says it so well:

"The end of a matter is better than its beginning,
and patience is better than pride.
9 Do not be quickly provoked in your spirit,
for anger resides in the lap of fools." (Eccles. 7:8-9)

I am also happy to report that I did not kill or injure anyone in a fit of rage during my studies!

Solomon then asks is to consider that God made all- both the "good" and the "bad". This is reminiscent of Job's words after his physical affliction with sores, and said in response to his wife: *"His wife said to him, "Are you still maintaining your integrity? Curse God and die!" 10 He replied, "You are talking like a foolish woman. Shall we accept good from God, and not trouble?"* (Job 2:9-10). We accept ALL from God- even when it is not what we would choose and prefer, because we fundamentally trust His wisdom and insight into our condition and spiritual state. And sometimes that which is seen as "bad" is truly a blessing in disguise! *Consider what God has done:*

"Who can straighten
what he has made crooked?
14 When times are good, be happy;
but when times are bad, consider this:
God has made the one
as well as the other.
Therefore, no one can discover
anything about their future." (Eccles. 7:13-14)

Solomon then returns to the theme of wisdom- its desirability, its power over foolishness, and instructs us as to wisdom's superiority. He also brings in a doctrine that we see in many places in Scripture, a theme that is repeated so that we will "get it"- that ALL have sinned (Romans 3:23):

“Wisdom makes one wise person more powerful
than ten rulers in a city.
20 Indeed, there is no one on earth who is righteous,
no one who does what is right and never sins.” (Eccles. 7:19-20)

Solomon goes on to say that there is not even one “upright man” in 1000. This is reminiscent of the search of Diogenes, who reportedly traveled with a lit lamp in the daytime “looking for an honest man” (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Diogenes_of_Sinope). The Scripture says:
“Look,” says the Teacher, “this is what I have discovered:

“Adding one thing to another to discover the scheme of things—
28 while I was still searching
but not finding—
I found one upright man among a thousand,
but not one upright woman among them all.
29 This only have I found:
God created mankind upright,
but they have gone in search of many schemes.” (Eccles. 7:27-29)

Solomon then goes on to say “obey the king”. One might wonder if there was at least some self serving motive here- after all, he was the king! He tells us:
“2 Obey the king’s command, I say, because you took an oath before God. 3 Do not be in a hurry to leave the king’s presence. Do not stand up for a bad cause, for he will do whatever he pleases. 4 Since a king’s word is supreme, who can say to him, “What are you doing?” (Eccles. 8:2-4) I would suppose the “oath” in verse 2 was an oath of obedience and allegiance to the king- the “Lord’s anointed”.

Then Solomon summarizes what he has “applied his mind” to understand, and concludes that after all his consideration, thought and application of wisdom, that there is still a profound mystery about God and His creation: *“All this I saw, as I applied my mind to everything done under the sun. There is a time when a man lords it over others to his own[b] hurt. 10 Then too, I saw the wicked buried—those who used to come and go from the holy place and receive praise[c] in the city where they did this. This too is meaningless. 11 When the sentence for a crime is not quickly carried out, people’s hearts are filled with schemes to do wrong. 12 Although a wicked person who commits a hundred crimes may live a long time, I know that it will go better with those who fear God, who are reverent before him. 13 Yet because the wicked do not fear God, it will not go well with them, and their days will not lengthen like a shadow.*

14 There is something else meaningless that occurs on earth: the righteous who get what the wicked deserve, and the wicked who get what the righteous deserve. This too, I say, is meaningless. 15 So I commend the enjoyment of life, because there is nothing better for a person under the sun than to eat and drink and be glad. Then joy will accompany them in their toil all the days of the life God has given them under the sun. 16 When I applied my mind to know wisdom and to observe the labor that is done on earth—people getting no sleep day or night— 17 then I saw all that God has done. No one can comprehend what goes on under the sun. Despite all

their efforts to search it out, no one can discover its meaning. Even if the wise claim they know, they cannot really comprehend it." (Eccles. 8:9-17)

Solomon confesses that he has tried diligently to "make sense" of the created world and its mysterious creator, but he has fallen short. Surely of all the men who have lived on earth, Solomon had one of the best opportunities to "solve" this mystery. If he could not do so, then what hope do we have? He says to us:
"So I reflected on all this and concluded that the righteous and the wise and what they do are in God's hands, but no one knows whether love or hate awaits them. 2 All share a common destiny—the righteous and the wicked, the good and the bad, [a] the clean and the unclean, those who offer sacrifices and those who do not.

As it is with the good,
so with the sinful;
as it is with those who take oaths,
so with those who are afraid to take them.
3 This is the evil in everything that happens under the sun: The same destiny overtakes all. The hearts of people, moreover, are full of evil and there is madness in their hearts while they live, and afterward they join the dead. 4 Anyone who is among the living has hope[b]—even a live dog is better off than a dead lion!

5 For the living know that they will die,
but the dead know nothing;
they have no further reward,
and even their name is forgotten.
6 Their love, their hate
and their jealousy have long since vanished;
never again will they have a part
in anything that happens under the sun." (Eccles 9:1-6)

Solomon's conclusion- live joyfully anyway! Despite the fact that what you do is meaningless, do everything with joy in your heart. Enjoy your life, your work, your wife and live out your days. *"Go, eat your food with gladness, and drink your wine with a joyful heart, for God has already approved what you do. 8 Always be clothed in white, and always anoint your head with oil. 9 Enjoy life with your wife, whom you love, all the days of this meaningless life that God has given you under the sun—all your meaningless days. For this is your lot in life and in your toilsome labor under the sun. 10 Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with all your might, for in the realm of the dead, where you are going, there is neither working nor planning nor knowledge nor wisdom."* (Eccles, 9:7-10)

Life (and "fate") can be very cruel, as the Teacher/Preacher notes:

I have seen something else under the sun:

The race is not to the swift
or the battle to the strong,
nor does food come to the wise

or wealth to the brilliant
or favor to the learned;
but time and chance happen to them all.
12 Moreover, no one knows when their hour will come:

As fish are caught in a cruel net,
or birds are taken in a snare,
so people are trapped by evil times
that fall unexpectedly upon them." (Eccles 9:11-12).

I remember one of my Army drill instructors warning us "young troops" that "Age and stealth- and not fighting fair- will beat youth and strength!"

At the end of the day, Solomon still holds up the virtue of wisdom, and its power to conquer evil and foolishness. Although this story has a decidedly "cloudy" ending, the virtue of wisdom is still clearly seen:

"I also saw under the sun this example of wisdom that greatly impressed me: 14 There was once a small city with only a few people in it. And a powerful king came against it, surrounded it and built huge siege works against it. 15 Now there lived in that city a man poor but wise, and he saved the city by his wisdom. But nobody remembered that poor man. 16 So I said, "Wisdom is better than strength." But the poor man's wisdom is despised, and his words are no longer heeded.

17 The quiet words of the wise are more to be heeded
than the shouts of a ruler of fools.
18 Wisdom is better than weapons of war,
but one sinner destroys much good." (Eccles. 9:13-18)

2 Corinthians 11:1-15

How tempting it is sometimes to want a "new truth" from Scripture. This explains the occasional fascinations with (for Protestants) the Apocrypha, and the "lost Gospels". The Scripture tells us (2 Tim 4:3*) "For the time will come when people will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear."* Paul explains that the Corinthians, as well as anyone else in the family of believers, should carefully avoid all teaching that is not consistent with the Scriptures- the accepted and canonized Scriptures. Paul has been careful tot each them "sound doctrine" based on both Scripture and first hand experience: *"I hope you will put up with me in a little foolishness. Yes, please put up with me! 2 I am jealous for you with a godly jealousy. I promised you to one husband, to Christ, so that I might present you as a pure virgin to him. 3 But I am afraid that just as Eve was deceived by the serpent's cunning, your minds may somehow be led astray from your sincere and pure devotion to Christ. 4 For if someone comes to you and preaches a Jesus other than the Jesus we preached, or if you receive a different spirit from the Spirit you received, or a different gospel from the one you accepted, you put up with it easily enough."* (2 Cor. 11:1-4) We don't need a "different Jesus"- we need only the "real thing"!

Yet the cults persist. My guide to listening to "new revelation" is simply a matter of "counting books". If the cult needs extra books, then I reject it out of hand. This includes the Book of Mormon, the book "Science and Health" by Mary Baker Eddy, and the "New World" translation of the Bible

(http://www.jw.org/en/publications/bible/). I will gladly speak, reason and even argue with those whom I encounter, as long as we accept the KJV or other official translation only!

Paul reminds his church family that error masqueades as truth, and that they must carefully examine that which they believe in order to avoid error: *"And I will keep on doing what I am doing in order to cut the ground from under those who want an opportunity to be considered equal with us in the things they boast about.13 For such people are false apostles, deceitful workers, masquerading as apostles of Christ. 14 And no wonder, for Satan himself masquerades as an angel of light. 15 It is not surprising, then, if his servants also masquerade as servants of righteousness. Their end will be what their actions deserve."* (2 Cor. 11:12-15). Notice that Paul is perfectly willing to take action against these "false apostles"- it is critically important that their false teachings do not go unchallenged by the truth!

Ecclesiastes 10-12 September 20, 2014 2 Corinthians 11:16-33

Every one in a while, I get what would seem to most to be a "silly thought" when reading the Scripture. Something I am reading reminds me of a person, and incident, or a truth that I just think is full of humor. Such a section is in Ecclesiasted 11. While we are very seriously considering the plight of mankind, the futility of life itself, and the "meaninglessness" and "folly" of human activity, comes this little gem:

"As dead flies give perfume a bad smell,
so a little folly outweighs wisdom and honor.
2 The heart of the wise inclines to the right,
but the heart of the fool to the left.
3 Even as fools walk along the road,
they lack sense
and show everyone how stupid they are.
4 If a ruler's anger rises against you,
do not leave your post;
calmness can lay great offenses to rest." (Ecclesaistes 10:1-4).

I'm showing my political bias, but I think a "t shirt" or hooded sweatshirt with the verse "The heart of the wise inclines to the right, but the heart of the fool to the left" would make a good conservative political statement...and it's Scripture!!

On a more serious note, Solomon notices that in many cases, the station in life of the "wise" and "fools" are often exactly backwards- this tragedy is a reality so many times:

"There is an evil I have seen under the sun,
the sort of error that arises from a ruler:
6 Fools are put in many high positions,
while the rich occupy the low ones.
7 I have seen slaves on horseback,
while princes go on foot like slaves." (Eccles. 10:5-7)

Then we see a “cheerful” and “optimistic” description of some daily activities (I’m kidding, these words are depressing and sad):
“Whoever digs a pit may fall into it;
whoever breaks through a wall may be bitten by a snake.
9 Whoever quarries stones may be injured by them;
whoever splits logs may be endangered by them.” (Ecclesaistes 10:8-9) Please remind me not to buy that log splitter I saw at Ace Hardware…..
For those whose demeanor goes to the “very paranoid”, we have this delightful little gem- sounds a bit like George Orwell’s 1984:
“Do not revile the king even in your thoughts,
or curse the rich in your bedroom,
because a bird in the sky may carry your words,
and a bird on the wing may report what you say.” (Eccles. 10:20).
I guess there are microphones and “spy cams” everywhere?…be careful what you do…and the thought police will make sure you are careful what you think!

Then we encounter investment advice. The gist of this is “invest in different things” (so far so good) because disaster is coming and you don’t know when or where:
“Ship your grain across the sea;
after many days you may receive a return.
2 Invest in seven ventures, yes, in eight;
you do not know what disaster may come upon the land.” (Eccles. 11:1-2)
The advice from the Preacher is then “because you don’t really understand God, then keep yourself busy. You may be surprised at how much you accomplish or is successful” (despite your ignorance):
“As you do not know the path of the wind,
or how the body is formed[b] in a mother’s womb,
so you cannot understand the work of God,
the Maker of all things.
6 Sow your seed in the morning,
and at evening let your hands not be idle,
for you do not know which will succeed,
whether this or that,
or whether both will do equally well.” (Eccles. 11:5-6)
The Preacher then tells us to “enjoy our youth”, even though our enjoyment of it is ultimately meaningless. We are to “banish anxiety” from our hearts and “cast off the troubles” of our bodies:
“Light is sweet,
and it pleases the eyes to see the sun.
8 However many years anyone may live,
let them enjoy them all.
But let them remember the days of darkness,
for there will be many.
Everything to come is meaningless.
9 You who are young, be happy while you are young,
and let your heart give you joy in the days of your youth.
Follow the ways of your heart
and whatever your eyes see,
but know that for all these things

God will bring you into judgment.
10 So then, banish anxiety from your heart
and cast off the troubles of your body,
for youth and vigor are meaningless." (Eccles, 11:7-10)

Some scholars feel that Chapter 12 of Ecclesiates is an "add-in" which was joined to the original scriptures later (https://www.logos.com/product/16620/the-end-of-the-matter-understanding-the-epilogue-of-ecclesiastes). Othres claim the same author used two different "voices" or characters to portray the truth about human nature, especially human nature apart from God. Whatever the truth of the matter is, the tone of the "epilogue" of Ecclesiastes is radically different from the rest of the book. The "epilogue" is a "looking back" and a drawing of conclusions. It is as if Solomon is saying- this is what man thinks- in the absencse of a living and ever-present God- this is many without hope and meaning- a glorified and intelligent animal only! Solomon no doubt believed in the Craetive and ever-present God of the universe, and gives us an oppostunuty to rejoice in the truth of the reality of God and His presence with us:

"Remember your Creator
in the days of your youth,
before the days of trouble come
and the years approach when you will say,
"I find no pleasure in them"—
2 before the sun and the light
and the moon and the stars grow dark,
and the clouds return after the rain;
3 when the keepers of the house tremble,
and the strong men stoop,
when the grinders cease because they are few,
and those looking through the windows grow dim;
4 when the doors to the street are closed
and the sound of grinding fades;
when people rise up at the sound of birds,
but all their songs grow faint;
5 when people are afraid of heights
and of dangers in the streets;
when the almond tree blossoms
and the grasshopper drags itself along
and desire no longer is stirred.
Then people go to their eternal home
and mourners go about the streets." (Eccles. 12:1-5).

The Teacher/Preacher then concludes with these words, which remond us of the truth of God's Word and His presence with us, and the "goading" that the Word often gives us a "prod" to go in the right direction- toward God instead of away from Him:

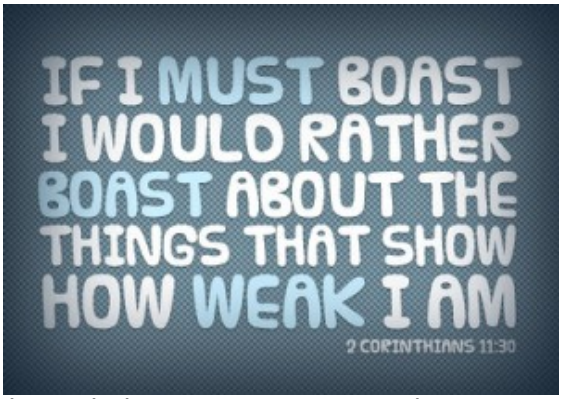
"Not only was the Teacher wise, but he also imparted knowledge to the people. He pondered and searched out and set in order many proverbs. 10 The Teacher searched to find just the right words, and what he wrote was upright and true.
11 The words of the wise are like goads, their collected sayings like firmly embedded nails—given by one shepherd.[d] 12 Be warned, my son, of anything in addition to them.
Of making many books there is no end, and much study wearies the body.

13 Now all has been heard;
here is the conclusion of the matter:
Fear God and keep his commandments,
for this is the duty of all mankind.
14 For God will bring every deed into judgment,
including every hidden thing,
whether it is good or evil." (Eccles 12:9-14)

2 Corinthians 11:16-33

Paul uses a "literary device" to make a point in theis second part of the second letter to the church in Corinth. He is exaggerating, in order to make a point. The apostle tries to get the church to see what kind of hardships and suffering he has been willing to undergo so that they may be properliy ministered to and cared for. He states: *"Since many are boasting in the way the world does, I too will boast. 19 You gladly put up with fools since you are so wise! 20 In fact, you even put up with anyone who enslaves you or exploits you or takes advantage of you or puts on airs or slaps you in the face. 21 To my shame I admit that we were too weak for that! Whatever anyone else dares to boast about—I am speaking as a fool—I also dare to boast about. 22 Are they Hebrews? So am I. Are they Israelites? So am I. Are they Abraham's descendants? So am I. 23 Are they servants of Christ? (I am out of my mind to talk like this.) I am more. I have worked much harder, been in prison more frequently, been flogged more severely, and been exposed to death again and again. 24 Five times I received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. 25 Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was pelted with stones, three times I was shipwrecked, I spent a night and a day in the open sea, 26 I have been constantly on the move. I have been in danger from rivers, in danger from bandits, in danger from my fellow Jews, in danger from Gentiles; in danger in the city, in danger in the country, in danger at sea; and in danger from false believers. 27 I have labored and toiled and have often gone without sleep; I have known hunger and thirst and have often gone without food; I have been cold and naked. 28 Besides everything else, I face daily the pressure of my concern for all the churches. 29 Who is weak, and I do not feel weak? Who is led into sin, and I do not inwardly burn?"* (2 Cor. 2: 18-29)

Then Paul says something that is very profound and helpful to me- his weakness is the very thing he 'boasts" about. This is true and helpful for several reasons: 1) this demonstrates that Paul is telling the "whole truth", and "not lying" (verse 31); 2) the very weakness Paul confesses is the backdrop on which God is allowed to be "free" to demonstrate His strength. The apostle states it this way: *"If I must boast, I will boast of the things that show my weakness. 31 The God and Father of the Lord Jesus, who is to be praised forever, knows that I am not lying. 32 In Damascus the governor under King Aretas had the city of the Damascenes guarded in order to arrest me. 33 But I was lowered in a basket from a window in the wall and slipped through his hands."* (2 Cor. 11:30-33). How amazing and wonderful it is that Paul "matter of factly" states that he was almost arrested, but that he was "lowered in a basket" from a window in the city wall and escaped! This is truly a "miracle" in an understatement. God was (and is) so clearly in control, preventing an untimely end to the ministry of this powerful preacher and evangelist.



http://heisourstrongtower.wordpress.com/2013/04/15/the-new-testament-93-day-chronological-reading-plan-day-67-assignment/

Song of Solomon 1-3 September 21, 2014 2 Corinthians 12

Finally, some "love and kisses" in the Old Testament. This is expecially refreshing after the doom and gloom of Ecclesiastes. As if to prove his range in writing subject and style, Solomon once more records words that illuminate and tech us much about he love God has for us and for His church. The analogy of the church as the very "Bride of Christ" takes much of its substance and symbolism from this delightful and somewhat frank and earthy book. We have Somomon (and the Holy Spirit) to tahnk for its beautiful poetry and imagery. Lest we get too "spiritual", this book is not only a spiritual analogy but also a very honest and compelling look at the physical love between a man and woman. We remember that God said is was "good" in Genesis, and it is certainly a gift we can celebrate without shame or guilt.

The book is a series of dialogs between "she" and "he"- two lovers about to marry, and the "friends" that observe their love and celebrate with them. The first chapter starts with a dialog between "she" and the "friends":

She

Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth—
for your love is more delightful than wine.
3 Pleasing is the fragrance of your perfumes;
your name is like perfume poured out.
No wonder the young women love you!
4 Take me away with you—let us hurry!
Let the king bring me into his chambers.

Friends

We rejoice and delight in you[b];
we will praise your love more than wine. (Song of Sol. 1:2-4)

We can conclude that this is a “woman of color”, since “she” comments on her physical appearance as “dark”- certainly not a surprising observation given the dark complexion of may persons from the Middle east:

Dark am I, yet lovely,
daughters of Jerusalem,
dark like the tents of Kedar,
like the tent curtains of Solomon.[c]
6 Do not stare at me because I am dark,
because I am darkened by the sun. (Song of Sol. 1:5-6)

“He” is clearly smitten with “she”, as he comments on her beauty:

I liken you, my darling, to a mare
among Pharaoh’s chariot horses.
10 Your cheeks are beautiful with earrings,
your neck with strings of jewels.
11 We will make you earrings of gold,
studded with silver. (Song. of Sol. 1:9-11)
They exchange words of love:
He

15 How beautiful you are, my darling!
Oh, how beautiful!
Your eyes are doves.
She

16 How handsome you are, my beloved!
Oh, how charming!
And our bed is verdant. (Song of Sol. 1:15-16)
In a particularly “racy” passage, they proclaim their love and desire for one another:
He

2 Like a lily among thorns
is my darling among the young women.
She

3 Like an apple[f] tree among the trees of the forest
is my beloved among the young men.
I delight to sit in his shade,
and his fruit is sweet to my taste. (Song of Sol. 2:1-3)
They unashamedly attest to all that the “belong” to each other:
She

16 My beloved is mine and I am his;
he browses among the lilies.
17 Until the day breaks
and the shadows flee,
turn, my beloved,
and be like a gazelle

or like a young stag
on the rugged hills." (Song of Sol. 2:16-17)
When "she" cannot find her lover, she does not rest until she has found him once more. This is a beautiful picture not only of "young love" but of the amazing love and pursuit of our very hearts and souls by the One who creared us to love Him!:

All night long on my bed
I looked for the one my heart loves;
I looked for him but did not find him.
2 I will get up now and go about the city,
through its streets and squares;
I will search for the one my heart loves.
So I looked for him but did not find him.
3 The watchmen found me
as they made their rounds in the city.
"Have you seen the one my heart loves?"
4 Scarcely had I passed them
when I found the one my heart loves.
I held him and would not let him go
till I had brought him to my mother's house,
to the room of the one who conceived me." (Song of Sol. 3:1-4)
Solomon himself is likely to have been the lover- the "he" in this poem- as he alludes in this passage:
"King Solomon made for himself the carriage;
he made it of wood from Lebanon.
10 Its posts he made of silver,
its base of gold.
Its seat was upholstered with purple,
its interior inlaid with love.
Daughters of Jerusalem, 11 come out,
and look, you daughters of Zion.
Look[h] on King Solomon wearing a crown,
the crown with which his mother crowned him
on the day of his wedding,
the day his heart rejoiced." (Song of Sol. 3:9-10)

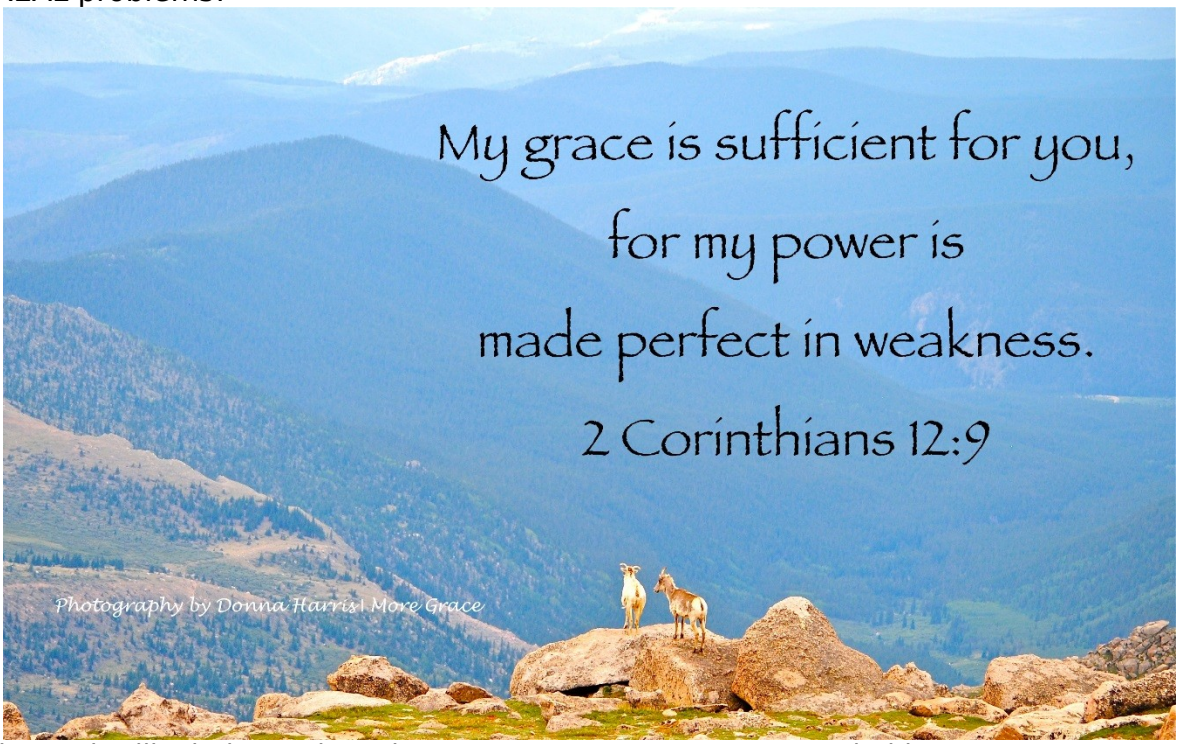
2 Corinthians 12

Paul refers to his struggles with "conceit" and concluds that God has kept him from this sin- actually the sin of pride and attendant self-righteousness- by allowing an infirmity to remain. Paul begged God that this "thorn in the flesh" be removed, but God told Paul simply *"My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness."* (2 Cor. 12:9) Once again w see the paradox- weakness that is really strength- our weakness that let's God's strength take over and do what it needs to: *Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me. 10 That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong."* (2 Cor. 12:9b-10).

There has been much speculation about the nature and identity of this “thorn” Paul refers to here. It is clearly a physical problem of some sort, by its description as a thorn “in my flesh” (verse 7). Some have supposed that Paul was diabetic, or had a problem with migraines or even with his vision, but it is certain that this physical ailment both troubled him and was a constant reminder of the “weakness” of the flesh and his weakness in general (http://www.awmi.net/extra/article/pauls_thorn).

Then there comes a reference to the “super apostles”, who had “ministered to the church” also but not in a way keeping with the pure message of the gospel. Paul chides the Corinthians for being caught up in the “hype, glamor and power” that accompanied some of these who drew attention to themselves rather than God (http://www.breakpoint.org/features-columns/archive/1266-the-super-apostles)

Paul then expresses his worry and concern that those in the Corinthian church have not made much progress in their walk of faith- they are still fighting with their flesh and “humanness” and have indulged themselves when they should not have: *“Have you been thinking all along that we have been defending ourselves to you? We have been speaking in the sight of God as those in Christ; and everything we do, dear friends, is for your strengthening. 20 For I am afraid that when I come I may not find you as I want you to be, and you may not find me as you want me to be. I fear that there may be discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, slander, gossip, arrogance and disorder. 21 I am afraid that when I come again my God will humble me before you, and I will be grieved over many who have sinned earlier and have not repented of the impurity, sexual sin and debauchery in which they have indulged.”* (2 Cor. 12:19-21). This was a REAL church filled with REAL people with REAL problems!



http://dwellingintheword.wordpress.com/2014/03/11/1267-2-corinthians-12/

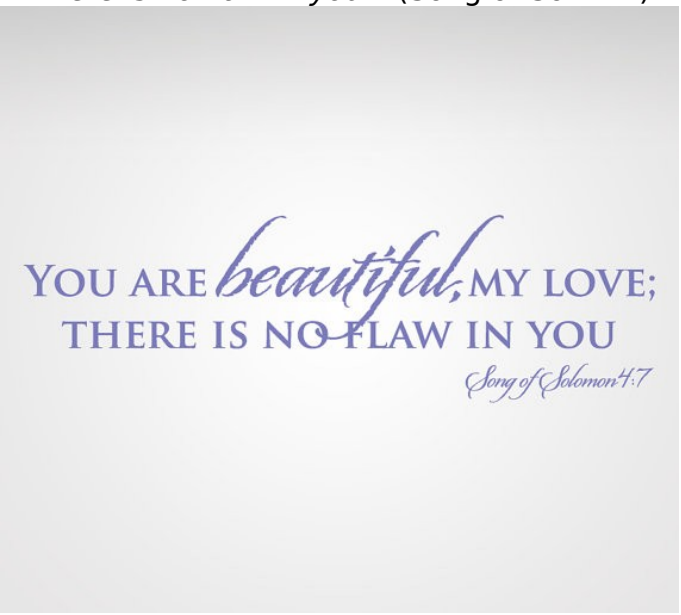
Song of Solomon 4-5 September 22, 2014 2 Corinthians 13

Tne dialogue continues between the two lover, as they declare their love and admiration for each other:

“He
How beautiful you are, my darling!
Oh, how beautiful!
Your eyes behind your veil are doves.
Your hair is like a flock of goats
descending from the hills of Gilead.
2 Your teeth are like a flock of sheep just shorn,
coming up from the washing.
Each has its twin;
not one of them is alone.
3 Your lips are like a scarlet ribbon;
your mouth is lovely.
Your temples behind your veil
are like the halves of a pomegranate.
4 Your neck is like the tower of David,
built with courses of stone[a];
on it hang a thousand shields,
all of them shields of warriors.” (Song of Sol. 4:1-4)

“He” then summarizes his total admiration for the beauty of his lover this way:

“You are altogether beautiful, my darling;
there is no flaw in you.” (Song of Sol. 4:7)



https://www.etsy.com/listing/88662477/song-of-solomon-47-scripture-wall-decal

In today's language, he might say "You're a perfect 10!" "She", hearing these words of love and praise for her beauty, responds by asking the "winds" to deliver her lover to her:
"Awake, north wind,
and come, south wind!
Blow on my garden,
that its fragrance may spread everywhere.
Let my beloved come into his garden
and taste its choice fruits." (Song of Sol. 4:16).

When her lover arrives, he announces that he has, indeed, tasted of the delights of the garden. This may remind us of the delight we feel when in the vry presence of the Lord- He bids us to join Hm in deep and joyful fellowship:
"I have come into my garden, my sister, my bride;
I have gathered my myrrh with my spice.
I have eaten my honeycomb and my honey;
I have drunk my wine and my milk." (Song of Sol. 5:1a)
An unexpected thing happens. "She" is reaching for the latch of the door, hoping to see her lover, and he is gone! Desperately she searched for him, her only desire to fing him and quickly. Would that we had the same urgency to fing the Lord, and join Him in fellowship and joyful worship.
"My beloved thrust his hand through the latch-opening;
my heart began to pound for him.
5 I arose to open for my beloved,
and my hands dripped with myrrh,
my fingers with flowing myrrh,
on the handles of the bolt.
6 I opened for my beloved,
but my beloved had left; he was gone.
My heart sank at his departure.[c]
I looked for him but did not find him.
I called him but he did not answer." (Song of Sol. 5:4-6)
For reasons that are unclear (at least to me), the "watchmen" of the city, who might have helped find her lover, instead teated her cruelly- they beat her and took her cloak:
"The watchmen found me
as they made their rounds in the city.
They beat me, they bruised me;
they took away my cloak,
those watchmen of the walls!
8 Daughters of Jerusalem, I charge you—
if you find my beloved,
what will you tell him?
Tell him I am faint with love." (Song of Sol. 5:7-8)
"She" then gushes forth with a beautiful and poetic description of her lover, describing his physical beauty in great detail- she even says his kisses "taste good" (my paraphrase!):
"My beloved is radiant and ruddy,
outstanding among ten thousand.
11 His head is purest gold;

his hair is wavy
and black as a raven.
12 His eyes are like doves
by the water streams,
washed in milk,
mounted like jewels.
13 His cheeks are like beds of spice
yielding perfume.
His lips are like lilies
dripping with myrrh.
14 His arms are rods of gold
set with topaz.
His body is like polished ivory
decorated with lapis lazuli.
15 His legs are pillars of marble
set on bases of pure gold.
His appearance is like Lebanon,
choice as its cedars.
16 His mouth is sweetness itself;
he is altogether lovely.
This is my beloved, this is my friend,
daughters of Jerusalem." (Song of Sol. 5:10-16)

A popular contemporary song describes Jesus as "altogether lovely" ("Here I Am to Worship"- written by Michael W. Smith)- and Jesus is indeed "lovely" in His perfection and love for us. The Scriptures, however, suggest that His loveliness was not in a physical sense at all

"And here I am to worship
Here I am to bow down
Here I am to say that You're my God
You're altogether lovely, altogether worthy
Altogether wonderful to me" (Michael W. Smith)

Isaiah tells us: *"He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to Him, nothing in His appearance that we should desire Him. He was despised and rejected by mankind, a man of suffering, and familiar with pain. Like one from whom people hide their faces he was despised, and we held him in low esteem."* (Isaiah 53:2-3)

So what do we make of beauty? Are we, like the evil Queen in the children's story Snow White, looking in the mirror asking "Who's the fairest of them all?" Are we so obsessed with youth and beauty that we have neglected our very spirits? I hope not!

2 Corinthians 13

Paul summarizes a very important principle, first delineated in the Old Testament Law, about the necessity of multiple witnesses for a conviction of wrongdoing. The issue here is not so much "legal" as it is with "wrongdoing" by members of the church- actions that undermine rather than build the fellowship of believers: *"This will be my third visit to you. "Every matter must be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses."[a] 2 I already gave you a warning when I was with you the second time. I now repeat it while absent: On my return I will not spare those who*

sinned earlier or any of the others, 3 since you are demanding proof that Christ is speaking through me. He is not weak in dealing with you, but is powerful among you. 4 For to be sure, he was crucified in weakness, yet he lives by God's power. Likewise, we are weak in him, yet by God's power we will live with him in our dealing with you." (2 Cor. 13:1-4) Notice that Paul, although criticized for being "weak" in person, promises he will *"not spare those who sinned earlier"* (verse 2).

There may have been some (understandable) frustration in Paul, sice he has visited the church multiple times and still sees immaturity, lack of purpose and tolerance of sin among the family of beilievers. To be fair, what would Paul find in your church (or mine) if he were to visit today? This is echoed in the passage in Luke 18, about Jesus' return to the earth: *"I tell you, he will see that they get justice, and quickly. However, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on the earth?*" (Luke 18:8)

We then receive advice about "examining ourselves"- are we truly following the Lord Jesus with joy and purpose? Are we building up the church or causing divisions and problems? Are we willing to "do the work" without grumbling and complaining- are we following the advice given in Paul's letter to the Galatians: "*Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up."* (Galatians 6:9)

Paul then explains why he is writing to the church: *"This is why I write these things when I am absent, that when I come I may not have to be harsh in my use of authority—the authority the Lord gave me for building you up, not for tearing you down."* (2 Cor. 13:10).

He then gives "final greetings" in the farewell portion of his letter, as always he is optimistic- not about any human efforts- but about the power and reach of the very Spirit of God- the Holy Spirit active in this (and every) church: *"Finally, brothers and sisters, rejoice! Strive for full restoration, encourage one another, be of one mind, live in peace. And the God of love and peace will be with you. 12 Greet one another with a holy kiss. 13 All God's people here send their greetings. 14 May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all."* (2 Cor. 13:11-14)

Song of Solomon 6-8 September 23, 2014 Galatians 1

Just as we long to be in Jesus' presence, the two lovers long for each other's company. They proclaim to their "friends" that they want nothing more than to be yogether- united in love. When the "friends" ask:

Where has your beloved gone,
most beautiful of women?
Which way did your beloved turn,
that we may look for him with you? (Song of Sol. 6:1)

“She” answers:

My beloved has gone down to his garden,
to the beds of spices,
to browse in the gardens
and to gather lilies.
3 I am my beloved’s and my beloved is mine;
he browses among the lilies. (Song of Sol. 6:2-3)

“He” then praises her beauty, in elegant and poetic language:
“You are as beautiful as Tirzah, my darling,
as lovely as Jerusalem,
as majestic as troops with banners.
5 Turn your eyes from me;
they overwhelm me.
Your hair is like a flock of goats
descending from Gilead.
6 Your teeth are like a flock of sheep
coming up from the washing.
Each has its twin,
not one of them is missing.
7 Your temples behind your veil
are like the halves of a pomegranate.
8 Sixty queens there may be,
and eighty concubines,
and virgins beyond number;
9 but my dove, my perfect one, is unique,
the only daughter of her mother,
the favorite of the one who bore her.
The young women saw her and called her blessed;
the queens and concubines praised her.” (Song of Sol. 6:4-9)
Then “he” goes on to praise her beauty more, and says (in my paraphrase) that she has “kisses sweeter than wine” (verses 8-9):
“How beautiful your sandaled feet,
O prince’s daughter!
Your graceful legs are like jewels,
the work of an artist’s hands.
2 Your navel is a rounded goblet
that never lacks blended wine.
Your waist is a mound of wheat
encircled by lilies.
3 Your breasts are like two fawns,
like twin fawns of a gazelle.
4 Your neck is like an ivory tower.
Your eyes are the pools of Heshbon
by the gate of Bath Rabbim.
Your nose is like the tower of Lebanon
looking toward Damascus.
5 Your head crowns you like Mount Carmel.
Your hair is like royal tapestry;

the king is held captive by its tresses.
6 How beautiful you are and how pleasing,
my love, with your delights!
7 Your stature is like that of the palm,
and your breasts like clusters of fruit.
8 I said, "I will climb the palm tree;
I will take hold of its fruit."
May your breasts be like clusters of grapes on the vine,
the fragrance of your breath like apples,
9 and your mouth like the best wine." (Song of Sol. 7:1-9)

"She" then voices a wish that "he" had been raised like a brother to her, so that she could have cared for him and nurtured him:
"If only you were to me like a brother,
who was nursed at my mother's breasts!
Then, if I found you outside,
I would kiss you,
and no one would despise me.
2 I would lead you
and bring you to my mother's house—
she who has taught me.
I would give you spiced wine to drink,
the nectar of my pomegranates.
3 His left arm is under my head
and his right arm embraces me.
4 Daughters of Jerusalem, I charge you:
Do not arouse or awaken love
until it so desires." (Song of Sol. 8:1-4).
The last verse (verse 4) is worthy of note "do not arouse or waken love until it so desires"- "she" is stating the reality that all who have experienced real love have known to be true- it is a powerful mixture of emotion, desire and the blending of spirits. It is no wonder that when love is consummated in a marriage, the Lord's clear will is that this union be permanent. The "two" literally become "one flesh"! (Gen 2:24; Mark 10:8, Ephesians 5:31).

"He" then attests to the power of love as well:
"Place me like a seal over your heart,
like a seal on your arm;
for love is as strong as death,
its jealousy[f] unyielding as the grave.
It burns like blazing fire,
like a mighty flame.[g]
7 Many waters cannot quench love;
rivers cannot sweep it away.
If one were to give
all the wealth of one's house for love,
it[h] would be utterly scorned." (Song of Sol. 8:6-7).
And so it is with us and our marriages and our church families- we are bound together with the cords of love- love that originates in the loving Father and His Son

who sacrificed Himself voluntarily so we could join the family of God! Praises to His Name always!

Galatians 1

The church in the Roman province of Galatia was probably established during Paul's first missionary journey. He writes this letter to cunter the influences of those spreading a "falso gospel" , which among other things required circumcision and adherence to the Law- a "Jew first" approach. Paul was concerned that these falso teachers would lead many in the curch astray, and endanger their true saving relationship with God (please see http://executableoutlines.com/ga/ga_00.htm).

In the first chapter of this letter, Paul identifies himself and reminds that church in Galatia of his credentials and the authority with which he praches the "truth": *"Paul, an apostle—sent not from men nor by a man, but by Jesus Christ and God the Father, who raised him from the dead— 2 and all the brothers and sisters[a] with me,*

To the churches in Galatia:

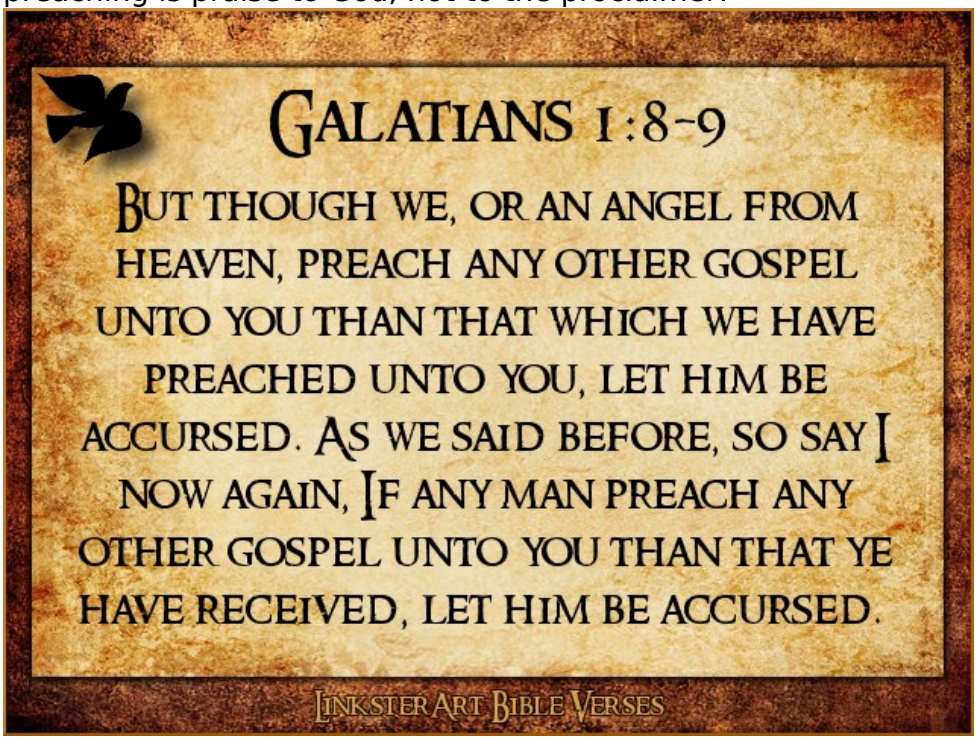
3 Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ, 4 who gave himself for our sins to rescue us from the present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father, 5 to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen." (Gal. 1:1-5). Notice that Paul clerly stats that he preaches as one who is sent by God Himself and Jesus the Son, and not from and human authority or mandate (verse 1)

Paul is frankly very worried that the believers in Galatia so quickly abandoned the Truth and went after false teaching: "I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you to live in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel— 7 which is really no gospel at all. Evidently some people are throwing you into confusion and are trying to pervert the gospel of Christ. 8 But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach a gospel other than the one we preached to you, let them be under God's curse! 9 As we have already said, so now I say again: If anybody is preaching to you a gospel other than what you accepted, let them be under God's curse!" (Gal. 1:6-9). We must also be careful and are forewarned- there is only one true gospel, and it should remain unaltered and unchanged- simply because we so easily make God "in our image" and change commands into "suggestions" and try evey trick we know to go "our own way". The Scriptures are, and will always remain, the authority- an external authority to which we must submit. As Martin Luther so succinctly stated "Sola scriptura" ("by Scripture alone"- please see http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sola_scriptura).

The apostle wants it to be extremely clear that the origin of the gospel he preaches is revelation from Jesus Himself, and not from the minds of men: " I want you to know, brothers and sisters, that the gospel I preached is not of human origin. 12 I did not receive it from any man, nor was I taught it; rather, I received it by revelation from Jesus Christ." (Gal. 1:11-12).

Paul then reminds the church in Galatia of his personal history, and how he, the persecutor of the church, became a powerful evangelist and church

planter/nurturer: *“For you have heard of my previous way of life in Judaism, how intensely I persecuted the church of God and tried to destroy it. 14 I was advancing in Judaism beyond many of my own age among my people and was extremely zealous for the traditions of my fathers. 15 But when God, who set me apart from my mother’s womb and called me by his grace, was pleased 16 to reveal his Son in me so that I might preach him among the Gentiles, my immediate response was not to consult any human being. 17 I did not go up to Jerusalem to see those who were apostles before I was, but I went into Arabia. Later I returned to Damascus. 18 Then after three years, I went up to Jerusalem to get acquainted with Cephas[b] and stayed with him fifteen days. 19 I saw none of the other apostles—only James, the Lord’s brother. 20 I assure you before God that what I am writing you is no lie. 21 Then I went to Syria and Cilicia. 22 I was personally unknown to the churches of Judea that are in Christ. 23 They only heard the report: “The man who formerly persecuted us is now preaching the faith he once tried to destroy.” 24 And they praised God because of me.”* Notice that the result of powerful and Spirit filled preaching is praise to God, not to the proclaimer!



http://linksterdiversions.blogspot.com/2013/04/daily-bible-verse-april-30-2013.html

Isaiah 1-3 September 24, 2014 Galatians 2

I have been following this reading plan for the “whole bible” since September 2001. The challenge was issued to use this plan so that we could be “well equipped” in te Word, and I accepted it. The challenge was issued by Rev Dan Mc Farland during my Emmaus Walk – right after 9/11- and I owe him a debt of gratitude for giving me the tool I needed to explore the riches of God’s Word! This is the passage/day that I started in Septermber, 2001, and I plan to make it a lifetime adventure!

Isiah is always a book I find myself “at home” in. Perhaps it’s the language, the vocabulary, the poetry, or the passages that have been set to such amazing musical settings as the Messiah. Whatever the reason, this is a place in Scripture I truly can call “home”.

Isaiah was an upper class priest, who had access to the throne and awareness of the daily routines of leadership as well as the ssues, problems and intrigue that sometimes surround a place of power (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Isaiah). According to both tradition and the biblical record, he prophesied during the reigns of a series of kings in the 8th century BC.

Isaiah 1 starts with an identification of the historic time and place of these prophesies: *“The vision concerning Judah and Jerusalem that Isaiah son of Amoz saw during the reigns of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz and Hezekiah, kings of Judah.”* (Isa. 1:1). The problems that God identifies with Judah are spiritual- they have abandoned true worship and reverence for God and have gone “their own way”, much to their discredit and peril:

“Hear me, you heavens! Listen, earth!
For the Lord has spoken:
“I reared children and brought them up,
but they have rebelled against me.
3 The ox knows its master,
the donkey its owner’s manger,
but Israel does not know,
my people do not understand.”
4 Woe to the sinful nation,
a people whose guilt is great,
a brood of evildoers,
children given to corruption!
They have forsaken the Lord;
they have spurned the Holy One of Israel
and turned their backs on him.” (Isa. 1:2-4)

The people may have felt they were prospering, but the truth was much darker- they were “wounded” and did not even realize their wounded state:

“Why should you be beaten anymore?
Why do you persist in rebellion?
Your whole head is injured,
your whole heart afflicted.
6 From the sole of your foot to the top of your head
there is no soundness—
only wounds and welts
and open sores,
not cleansed or bandaged
or soothed with olive oil.
7 Your country is desolate,
your cities burned with fire;
your fields are being stripped by foreigners
right before you,
laid waste as when overthrown by strangers.
8 Daughter Zion is left

like a shelter in a vineyard,
like a hut in a cucumber field,
like a city under siege.
9 Unless the Lord Almighty
had left us some survivors,
we would have become like Sodom,
we would have been like Gomorrah." (Isa. 1:5-9)

God is literally sickened with their displays of "religion"- displays that have no connection with the real state of their souls:

"Hear the word of the Lord,
you rulers of Sodom;
listen to the instruction of our God,
you people of Gomorrah!
11 "The multitude of your sacrifices—
what are they to me?" says the Lord.
"I have more than enough of burnt offerings,
of rams and the fat of fattened animals;
I have no pleasure
in the blood of bulls and lambs and goats.
12 When you come to appear before me,
who has asked this of you,
this trampling of my courts?
13 Stop bringing meaningless offerings!
Your incense is detestable to me.
New Moons, Sabbaths and convocations—
I cannot bear your worthless assemblies.
14 Your New Moon feasts and your appointed festivals
I hate with all my being.
They have become a burden to me;
I am weary of bearing them.
15 When you spread out your hands in prayer,
I hide my eyes from you;
even when you offer many prayers,
I am not listening.
Your hands are full of blood!
16 Wash and make yourselves clean.
Take your evil deeds out of my sight;
stop doing wrong.
17 Learn to do right; seek justice.
Defend the oppressed.[a]
Take up the cause of the fatherless;
plead the case of the widow." (Isa. 1:10-17)

Isaiah even calls the leaders and people "rulers of Sodom" and "people of Gomorrah"- perhaps this was a bit of a "wake up call" to them? God offers a remedy and a cleansing- His will is always for His children's good!

“Come now, let us settle the matter,”
says the Lord.
“Though your sins are like scarlet,
they shall be as white as snow;
though they are red as crimson,
they shall be like wool.
19 If you are willing and obedient,
you will eat the good things of the land;
20 but if you resist and rebel,
you will be devoured by the sword.”
For the mouth of the Lord has spoken.” (Isa. 1:18-20). This was alleged to be one of president Lyndon Johnson’s favorite scriptures – *“Come now, and let us reason together, saith the Lord: though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they be red like crimson, they shall be as wool.”* (Isa. 1:18 KJV) please see (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lyndon_B._Johnson)
God’s promise is that He will cleans eand forgive, and we are the recipients of this amazing love and mercy. The people of God were not yet convinced of their sin, and were not ready to turn from it. God promsed that they would be ashamed because they still were clinging to their “old ways”:
“You will be ashamed because of the sacred oaks
in which you have delighted;
you will be disgraced because of the gardens
that you have chosen.
30 You will be like an oak with fading leaves,
like a garden without water.
31 The mighty man will become tinder
and his work a spark;
both will burn together,
with no one to quench the fire.” (Isa. 1:29-31)
There is, however, always hope. As long as we live, as long as there is breath in us, we can still turn to God and be saved. The time was coming, the Lord said t Isaiah, when the “mountain of the Lord” would be established:
“This is what Isaiah son of Amoz saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem:

2 In the last days
the mountain of the Lord’s temple will be established
as the highest of the mountains;
it will be exalted above the hills,
and all nations will stream to it.
3 Many peoples will come and say,

“Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord,
to the temple of the God of Jacob.
He will teach us his ways,
so that we may walk in his paths.”

The law will go out from Zion,
the word of the Lord from Jerusalem." (Isa. 2:1-3).
This is promised to occur "in the last days" (verse 2)- a time which many believe is now, and in this present age. In those days, all will see the fearful majesty and power of the Living God:
"Go into the rocks, hide in the ground
from the fearful presence of the Lord
and the splendor of his majesty!
11 The eyes of the arrogant will be humbled
and human pride brought low;
the Lord alone will be exalted in that day.
12 The Lord Almighty has a day in store
for all the proud and lofty,
for all that is exalted
(and they will be humbled),
13 for all the cedars of Lebanon, tall and lofty,
and all the oaks of Bashan,
14 for all the towering mountains
and all the high hills,
15 for every lofty tower
and every fortified wall,
16 for every trading ship[d]
and every stately vessel.
17 The arrogance of man will be brought low
and human pride humbled;
the Lord alone will be exalted in that day,
18 and the idols will totally disappear.
19 People will flee to caves in the rocks
and to holes in the ground
from the fearful presence of the Lord
and the splendor of his majesty,
when he rises to shake the earth." (Isa. 2:10-19). The key to this will be that the "arrogance of man will be brought low and human pride humbled" (verse 17). Only as we are humble can we see ourselves as God sees us, and see the right relationship with our God!

God will bring His judgment on the people:
"See now, the Lord,
the Lord Almighty,
is about to take from Jerusalem and Judah
both supply and support:
all supplies of food and all supplies of water,
2 the hero and the warrior,
the judge and the prophet,
the diviner and the elder,
3 the captain of fifty and the man of rank,
the counselor, skilled craftsman and clever enchanter.
4 "I will make mere youths their officials;
children will rule over them."
5 People will oppress each other—

man against man, neighbor against neighbor.
The young will rise up against the old,
the nobody against the honored." (Isa. 3:1-5).
The luxury, the "high living", the finery and the perfumes of the rich and those who are "too proud" to humble themselves before God will all come to an end as God issues His judgment and correction against these who disregard and not revere Him:
"Instead of fragrance there will be a stench;
instead of a sash, a rope;
instead of well-dressed hair, baldness;
instead of fine clothing, sackcloth;
instead of beauty, branding.
25 Your men will fall by the sword,
your warriors in battle.
26 The gates of Zion will lament and mourn;
destitute, she will sit on the ground." (Isa. 3:24-26).

Galatians 2

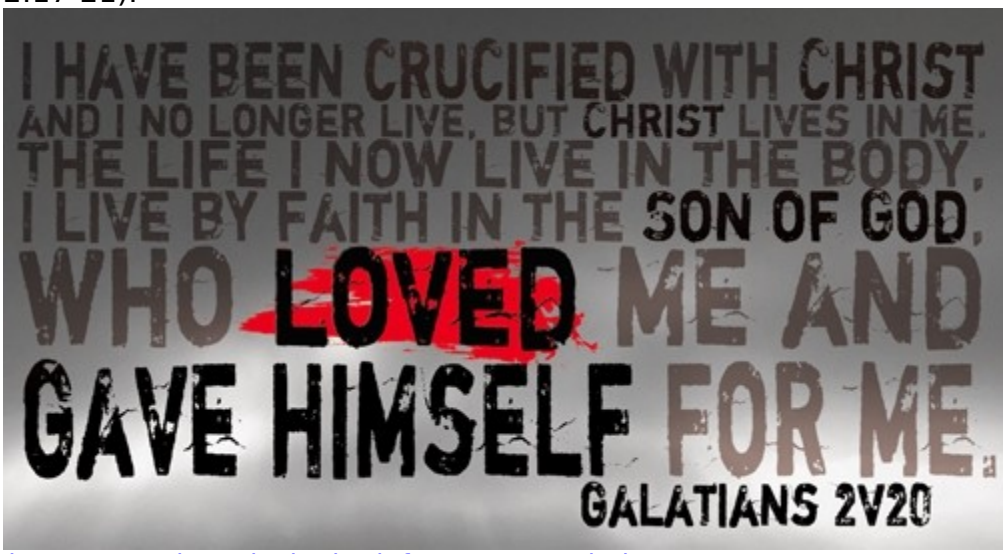
Paul alludes to a trip he made to Jerusalem with Barnabus and Titus. The purpose of this trip was tp follow a private "revalation" Paul had received, and to present to the leaders in the Jerualem church the gospel Paul had been preaching. Then Paul adds*: "I wanted to be sure I was not running and had not been running my race in vain."* (Gal. 2:2b) And yet he notes that Titus, in response to some preaching and teaching (presumably from the "Judaizers") had become circumcised. The threat here was that the freedom that Paul – and we- enjoy in Christ was being compromised and reduced by those who preached "Jewish first". They held that the only true path to becoming a Cristain believer was to become a Jew- following the Law- first! This practice was from what Paul lables "false believers" and he assures the church in Galatia that he has not succomed to this false teaching: *"This matter arose because some false believers had infiltrated our ranks to spy on the freedom we have in Christ Jesus and to make us slaves. 5 We did not give in to them for a moment, so that the truth of the gospel might be preserved for you."* (Gal. 2:4-5)

Paul correctly points out that he was called by God to minister primarily to the "uncircumcised" while Peter was called to minister and preach to the "circumcised": "As for those who were held in high esteem—whatever they were makes no difference to me; God does not show favoritism—they added nothing to my message. 7 On the contrary, they recognized that I had been entrusted with the task of preaching the gospel to the uncircumcised,[a] just as Peter had been to the circumcised.[b] 8 For God, who was at work in Peter as an apostle to the circumcised, was also at work in me as an apostle to the Gentiles." (Gal. 2:6-8)

The apostle was more than willing to confront Cephas and tell him that he was preaching a "false gospel", after all. Paul notes, he (Cephas) "stood condemned". He describes the confrontation: "*When Cephas came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he stood condemned. 12 For before certain men came from James, he used to eat with the Gentiles.But when they arrived, he began to draw back and separate himself from the Gentiles because he was afraid of those who belonged to the circumcision group. 13 The other Jews joined him in his hypocrisy, so that by their hypocrisy even Barnabas was led astray. 14 When I saw that they*

were not acting in line with the truth of the gospel, I said to Cephas in front of them all, "You are a Jew, yet you live like a Gentile and not like a Jew.How is it, then, that you force Gentiles to follow Jewish customs?" (Gal. 2:11-14).

Paul then explains in powerful language that "righteousness" could never be won or earned "through the Law" or else Christ had died "for nothing"- he says: *"But if, in seeking to be justified in Christ, we Jews find ourselves also among the sinners, doesn't that mean that Christ promotes sin? Absolutely not! 18 If I rebuild what I destroyed, then I really would be a lawbreaker. 19 "For through the law I died to the law so that I might live for God. 20 I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I now live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. 21 I do not set aside the grace of God, for if righteousness could be gained through the law, Christ died for nothing!"* (Gal. 2:17-21).



http://www.closerdaybyday.info/2011/03/galatians-2/

Isaiah 4-6 September 25, 2014 Galatians 3

The grim predictions continue- "in that day" all manner of horrible and unimaginable things will be everyday occurrences:

1 In that day seven women
will take hold of one man
and say, "We will eat our own food
and provide our own clothes;
only let us be called by your name.
Take away our disgrace!" (Isa. 4:1)

The "Branch of the Lord" is also coming. This reference is seen elsewhere in Isaiah (11:1). This is a sign of restoration, of the majestic cleanising of that which is despoiled and unclean, which only the Lord Himself could accomplish: *"In that day the Branch of the Lord will be beautiful and glorious, and the fruit of the land will be the pride and glory of the survivors in Israel. 3 Those who are left in Zion, who remain in Jerusalem, will be called holy, all who are recorded among the living in Jerusalem. 4 The Lord will wash away the filth of the women of Zion; he will cleanse*

the bloodstains from Jerusalem by a spirit[a] of judgment and a spirit[b] of fire. 5 Then the Lord will create over all of Mount Zion and over those who assemble there a cloud of smoke by day and a glow of flaming fire by night; over everything the glory[c] will be a canopy. 6 It will be a shelter and shade from the heat of the day, and a refuge and hiding place from the storm and rain." (Isa. 4:2-6)

In an extended allegory, God calls His people to consider the story of a certain vineyard which was built by "His loved one":

"I will sing for the one I love
a song about his vineyard:
My loved one had a vineyard
on a fertile hillside.
2 He dug it up and cleared it of stones
and planted it with the choicest vines.
He built a watchtower in it
and cut out a winepress as well.
Then he looked for a crop of good grapes,
but it yielded only bad fruit." (Isa. 5:1-2)

Isaiah then explains the allegory, and tells the meaning of each part- God has built a vineyard- His very people- and they have yielded "bad fruit". The people who were heareers of this prophesy would immediately understand…what can one do with such a vineyard but to either destroy it or plant another- to "start over". God is more merciful than this- he tries to redeem and change the "bad" into good!:

"The vineyard of the Lord Almighty
is the nation of Israel,
and the people of Judah
are the vines he delighted in.
And he looked for justice, but saw bloodshed;
for righteousness, but heard cries of distress." (Isa. 5:7)

There will certainly be consequences, but God will restore the people and the land after a "cleansing":

"So people will be brought low
and everyone humbled,
the eyes of the arrogant humbled.
16 But the Lord Almighty will be exalted by his justice,
and the holy God will be proved holy by his righteous acts.
17 Then sheep will graze as in their own pasture;
lambs will feed[g] among the ruins of the rich." (Isa. 5:15-17)

We then see a series of “woes”- the consequences of the evil in the hearts and minds of God’s people. These are reminiscent of the “woes” that Jesus pronounced on the unrighteous of His day (Matthew 23:13-36):

“Woe to those who call evil good
and good evil,
who put darkness for light
and light for darkness,
who put bitter for sweet
and sweet for bitter.
21 Woe to those who are wise in their own eyes
and clever in their own sight.
22 Woe to those who are heroes at drinking wine
and champions at mixing drinks,
23 who acquit the guilty for a bribe,
but deny justice to the innocent.
24 Therefore, as tongues of fire lick up straw
and as dry grass sinks down in the flames,
so their roots will decay
and their flowers blow away like dust;
for they have rejected the law of the Lord Almighty
and spurned the word of the Holy One of Israel.
25 Therefore the Lord’s anger burns against his people;
his hand is raised and he strikes them down.
The mountains shake,
and the dead bodies are like refuse in the streets.
Yet for all this, his anger is not turned away,
his hand is still upraised.” (Isa. 5:20-25)

God will punish His people with the armies from distant lands, who will be summoned by Him “with a whistle”:

“He lifts up a banner for the distant nations,
he whistles for those at the ends of the earth.
Here they come,
swiftly and speedily!
27 Not one of them grows tired or stumbles,
not one slumbers or sleeps;
not a belt is loosened at the waist,
not a sandal strap is broken.
28 Their arrows are sharp,
all their bows are strung;
their horses’ hooves seem like flint,
their chariot wheels like a whirlwind.” (Isa. 5:26-28).

One of the most memorable visions in the Old Testament, right in the same category as the burning bush and the parting of the Red/Reed Sea, is the image of God in His temple. God gave Isaiah this vision at a specific time “the year thak King Uzziah died” and place (in the temple) and for a specific purpose (to call Isaiah to be His spokesman to the people. This calling was a credential, as well as those short term prophesies that were fulfilled. The vision was awesome:

“In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord, high and exalted, seated on a throne; and the train of his robe filled the temple. 2 Above him were seraphim, each with six wings: With two wings they covered their faces, with two they covered their feet, and with two they were flying. 3 And they were calling to one another:

“Holy, holy, holy is the Lord Almighty;
the whole earth is full of his glory.”
4 At the sound of their voices the doorposts and thresholds shook and the temple was filled with smoke.

5 “Woe to me!” I cried. “I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the Lord Almighty.” (Isa. 6:1-5)
The contemporary song “I See the Lord” performed by Chris Falson, is a modern setting of this incredible vision (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=reN-3g-myJM)

Isaiah feels unworthy- yet his call is certain. His mission- to provlaim God’s word to those who will neither hear or understand it:
“He said, “Go and tell this people:

“‘Be ever hearing, but never understanding;
be ever seeing, but never perceiving.’
10 Make the heart of this people calloused;
make their ears dull
and close their eyes.[a]
Otherwise they might see with their eyes,
hear with their ears,
understand with their hearts,
and turn and be healed.”
11 Then I said, “For how long, Lord?”

And he answered:

“Until the cities lie ruined
and without inhabitant,
until the houses are left deserted
and the fields ruined and ravaged,
12 until the Lord has sent everyone far away
and the land is utterly forsaken.
13 And though a tenth remains in the land,
it will again be laid waste.
But as the terebinth and oak
leave stumps when they are cut down,
so the holy seed will be the stump in the land.” (Isa. 5:9-13).

We, like Isaiah, cry out to God “How long?”. And His answer is always the same- until everything I need to accomplish is accomplished! We are equipped, energized and empowered by the very Spirit of God, and are simply told to “go and tell!” This may make true and total semse only to God, but when we trust Him and obey Him, miracles happen!

http://thefirstpremise.wordpress.com/2012/05/29/a-brief-homily-on-isaiah-61-8-for-the-widows-of-the-church-may-30-2012/

Galatians 3

It'a really a simple concept…faith comes by "hearing" *…"Consequently, faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word about Christ."* (Romans 10:17) Once we have "heard", the Holy Spirit applies the truth we hear to our hearts, and we can (with God's enabling grace) respond positively and allow our very wills to be surrendered to Him, allow our allegiance to be only to Him, and as an act of the will decode to follow Him only! Thiat is whay, Paul explains, that when Abram "believed God", it (his faith) was "credited to him as righteousness". The term "credited" is actually an accounting term, which indicates that something has been "added" to your account- in this case the priceless gift of salvation! Paul writes: *"You foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you? Before your very eyes Jesus Christ was clearly portrayed as crucified. 2 I would like to learn just one thing from you: Did you receive the Spirit by the works of the law, or by believing what you heard? 3 Are you so foolish? After beginning by means of the Spirit, are you now trying to finish by means of the flesh?[a] 4 Have you experienced[b] so much in vain—if it really was in vain? 5 So again I ask, does God give you his Spirit and work miracles among you by the works of the law, or by your believing what you heard? 6 So also Abraham "believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness."* (Gal. 3:1-6)

The only other option for salvation is to keep the Law- all of it, perfectly, all the time without a single omission or commission! Since this is impossible, the One who was without sin- who lived this sinless perfect life- sacrificed Himself for us: *"For all who rely on the works of the law are under a curse, as it is written: "Cursed is everyone who does not continue to do everything written in the Book of the Law."[e] 11 Clearly no one who relies on the law is justified before God, because "the righteous will live by faith."[f] 12 The law is not based on faith; on the contrary, it says, "The person who does these things will live by them."[g] 13 Christ redeemed us from the*

curse of the law by becoming a curse for us, for it is written: "Cursed is everyone who is hung on a pole."[h] 14 He redeemed us in order that the blessing given to Abraham might come to the Gentiles through Christ Jesus, so that by faith we might receive the promise of the Spirit." (Gal. 3:10-14)

So why was the Law given at all? Paul answers this very logical question as follows: *"Why, then, was the law given at all? It was added because of transgressions until the Seed to whom the promise referred had come. The law was given through angels and entrusted to a mediator. 20 A mediator, however, implies more than one party; but God is one. 21 Is the law, therefore, opposed to the promises of God? Absolutely not! For if a law had been given that could impart life, then righteousness would certainly have come by the law. 22 But Scripture has locked up everything under the control of sin, so that what was promised, being given through faith in Jesus Christ, might be given to those who believe."* (Gal. 3:19-22) We might think of the Law not as a physician which heals us, but as a diagnostician who tells us "how sick we really are".

Paul expands on this theme of righteousness through faith, telling us that the Law "held us captive" until the Spirit could set us free. We might say that it is our jailer. *"Before the coming of this faith,[j] we were held in custody under the law, locked up until the faith that was to come would be revealed. 24 So the law was our guardian until Christ came that we might be justified by faith. 25 Now that this faith has come, we are no longer under a guardian. 26 So in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith, 27 for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. 28 There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. 29 If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise."* (Gal 3:23-29) According to Paul, we are "all one in Christ Jesus" and the distinctions that we are so quick to make are no longer valid or valuable!

Isaiah 7-9 September 26, 2014 Galatians 4

The intrigue and politics of the Middle East often lead to tangled alliances, marriages of political convenience, and war. This has ben the case for thousands of years. Isaiah is called to speak- to prophesy- to two kings and proclaim the Lord's Word to them- to the king of Israel/Ephriam (the northern kingdom- already divided from Judah) and the king of Aram. These two- Pekah son of Remaliah and king of Israel and Rezin king of Aram, who had attacked Judah but "could not overpower it" (verse 1). The king of Judah, Ahaz, was shaken by this alliance- not one but two powerful military forces were trying to overrun and capture Judah and Jerusalem: *"When Ahaz son of Jotham, the son of Uzziah, was king of Judah, King Rezin of Aram and Pekah son of Remaliah king of Israel marched up to fight against Jerusalem, but they could not overpower it. Now the house of David was told, "Aram has allied itself with Ephraim"; so the hearts of Ahaz and his people were shaken, as the trees of the forest are shaken by the wind.*

Then the Lord said to Isaiah, "Go out, you and your son Shear-Jashub, to meet Ahaz at the end of the aqueduct of the Upper Pool, on the road to the Launderer's Field. Say to him, 'Be careful, keep calm and don't be afraid. Do not lose heart because of these two smoldering stubs of firewood—because of the fierce anger of Rezin and

Aram and of the son of Remaliah. Aram, Ephraim and Remaliah's son have plotted your ruin, saying, "Let us invade Judah; let us tear it apart and divide it among ourselves, and make the son of Tabeel king over it." 7 Yet this is what the Sovereign Lord says:

"'It will not take place,
it will not happen,
for the head of Aram is Damascus,
and the head of Damascus is only Rezin.
Within sixty-five years
Ephraim will be too shattered to be a people.
The head of Ephraim is Samaria,
and the head of Samaria is only Remaliah's son.
If you do not stand firm in your faith,
you will not stand at all.'" (Isaiah 7:1-9).

God even challenged Ahaz to "ask for a sign", but to his credit, Ahaz said he would not put God to the test: *"Again the Lord spoke to Ahaz, "Ask the Lord your God for a sign, whether in the deepest depths or in the highest heights." But Ahaz said, "I will not ask; I will not put the Lord to the test."* (Isa. 7:10-12)

Then follows a prophesy that is a "dividing line" between Judaism and Christianity- not the prophesy itself but the "full interpretation of it": *"Then Isaiah said, "Hear now, you house of David! Is it not enough to try the patience of humans? Will you try the patience of my God also? Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel. He will be eating curds and honey when he knows enough to reject the wrong and choose the right, for before the boy knows enough to reject the wrong and choose the right, the land of the two kings you dread will be laid waste. The Lord will bring on you and on your people and on the house of your father a time unlike any since Ephraim broke away from Judah—he will bring the king of Assyria."* (Isa. 7:13-17). There are at least two interpretations to this prophesy: 1) the child referred to is a "son" who is named "Immaneul" (God With You) and he will lead his people and bring a lasting peace; 2) the son/ child prophesy was fulfilled two ways- a) with the short term appearance of a child as in 1); and then b) a long term fulfilment in the Lord Jesus Himself- who bore than Name "Emmanuel" as well as Jeshua/Joshua (a savior of the people/ deliverer of the people). The Jewish interpretation, of course, follows the first interpretation- a "near fulfilment" of the prophecy about the son/child/servant.

Despite the fact that these two enemies- Israel and Aram (now Syria) would be defeated, the Lord would then use Assyria as his instrument of punishment of Isreal for the wickedness and unfaithfulness*: "In that day the Lord will whistle for flies from the Nile delta in Egypt and for bees from the land of Assyria. They will all come and settle in the steep ravines and in the crevices in the rocks, on all the thornbushes and at all the water holes. In that day the Lord will use a razor hired from beyond the Euphrates River—the king of Assyria—to shave your head and private parts, and to cut off your beard also."* (Isa. 7:18-20).

Then follows a very puzzling passage (at least puzzling to me). The Lord tells Isaiah to write down a name, and then Isaiah writes the name down in the presence of witnesses, makes love to a "prophetess", and she bears a son with the same name.

The translation of this name is “quick to the plunder, swift to the spoil” and we see the name of this child in this passage:
“The Lord said to me, “Take a large scroll and write on it with an ordinary pen: Maher-Shalal-Hash-Baz.” So I called in Uriah the priest and Zechariah son of Jeberekiah as reliable witnesses for me. Then I made love to the prophetess, and she conceived and gave birth to a son. And the Lord said to me, “Name him Maher-Shalal-Hash-Baz. For before the boy knows how to say ‘My father’ or ‘My mother,’ the wealth of Damascus and the plunder of Samaria will be carried off by the king of Assyria.”

The Lord spoke to me again:

“Because this people has rejected
the gently flowing waters of Shiloah
and rejoices over Rezin
and the son of Remaliah,
therefore the Lord is about to bring against them
the mighty floodwaters of the Euphrates—
the king of Assyria with all his pomp.
It will overflow all its channels,
run over all its banks
and sweep on into Judah, swirling over it,
passing through it and reaching up to the neck.
Its outspread wings will cover the breadth of your land,
Immanuel!” (Isa. 8:1-8)
My confusion is over Isaiah “making love to the prophetess” (verse 3). The commentary saved my bacon again- the wife of the prophet is often referred to as a “prophetess” regardless of her special spiritual gifts (or lack of same). (Please see: http://biblehub.com/isaiah/8-3.htm).

Then the Lord warns against consulting a “medium”, a sin that Saul committed and grived the Lord with this practice (1 Samuel 28:7). The Scripture tells us: *“When someone tells you to consult mediums and spiritists, who whisper and mutter, should not a people inquire of their God? Why consult the dead on behalf of the living? Consult God’s instruction and the testimony of warning. If anyone does not speak according to this word, they have no light of dawn.”* (Isa. 8:19-20)

Once again we see prophesy that has “near/future” fulfilment content. The traditional Jewish interpretation points to a near fulfilment, while Christain theology sees this prophesy as one clearly pointing to Jesus, the Messiah:
“The people walking in darkness
have seen a great light;
on those living in the land of deep darkness
a light has dawned.
You have enlarged the nation
and increased their joy;
they rejoice before you
as people rejoice at the harvest,
as warriors rejoice

when dividing the plunder." (Isa. 9:2-3).

There are even more specifics in this prophesy, all of which were fulfilled exactly by Jesus:

"For to us a child is born,
to us a son is given,
and the government will be on his shoulders.
And he will be called
Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.
Of the greatness of his government and peace
there will be no end.
He will reign on David's throne
and over his kingdom,
establishing and upholding it
with justice and righteousness
from that time on and forever.
The zeal of the LORD Almighty
will accomplish this." (Isa. 9:6-7)

Despite the Lord's chastening of His people, they persist in evil and do not turn away from their wickedness. This certainly grieves the Lord, but he continues to allow punishment to fall on them in hopes of reclaiming them:

"But the people have not returned to him who struck them,
nor have they sought the Lord Almighty.
So the Lord will cut off from Israel both head and tail,
both palm branch and reed in a single day;
the elders and dignitaries are the head,
the prophets who teach lies are the tail.
Those who guide this people mislead them,
and those who are guided are led astray.
Therefore the Lord will take no pleasure in the young men,
nor will he pity the fatherless and widows,
for everyone is ungodly and wicked,
every mouth speaks folly.
Yet for all this, his anger is not turned away,
his hand is still upraised.
Surely wickedness burns like a fire;
it consumes briers and thorns,
it sets the forest thickets ablaze,
so that it rolls upward in a column of smoke.
By the wrath of the Lord Almighty
the land will be scorched
and the people will be fuel for the fire;
they will not spare one another.
On the right they will devour,
but still be hungry;
on the left they will eat,
but not be satisfied.
Each will feed on the flesh of their own offspring[b]:
Manasseh will feed on Ephraim, and Ephraim on Manasseh;
together they will turn against Judah." (Isa. 9:13-21a)

Then Isaiah sadly concludes: *“Yet for all this, his anger is not turned away, his hand is still upraised.”* (Isa. 9:21b)

Galatians 4

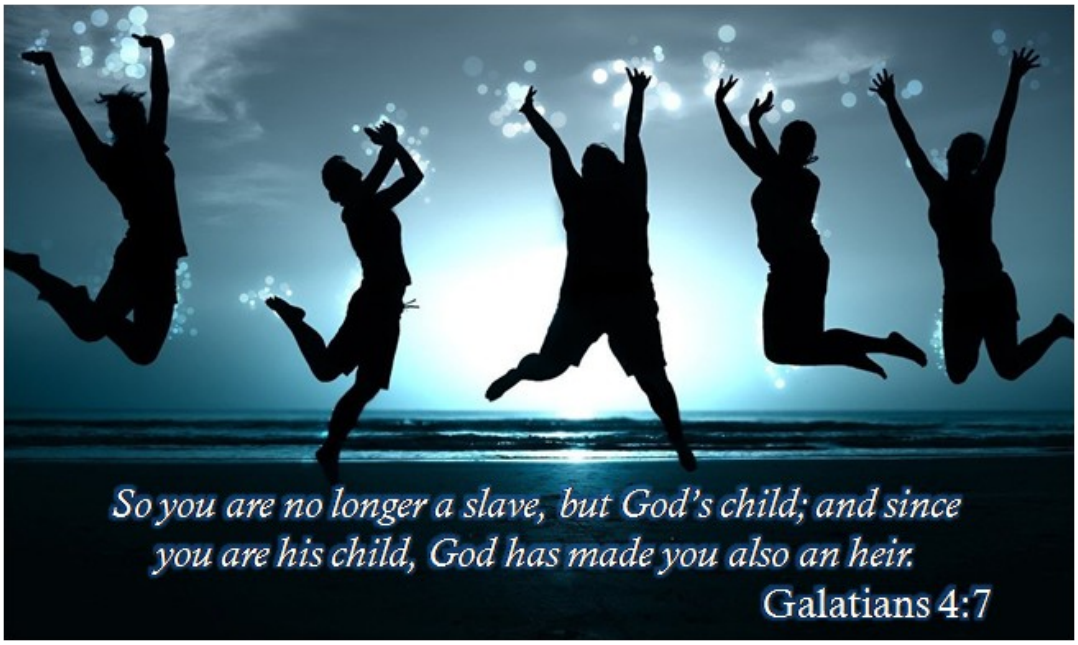
Paul explains to the Galatians that they are no longer “slaves” to this world, but because of God’s rich grace they have become heirs to the very Kingdom of God- they are now part of God’s family and can call him “Abba” or “Daddy” as we say in the South- there is a rich intimacy that can be found nowhere else than in His presence: *“What I am saying is that as long as an heir is underage, he is no different from a slave, although he owns the whole estate. The heir is subject to guardians and trustees until the time set by his father. So also, when we were underage, we were in slavery under the elemental spiritual forces of the world. But when the set time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those under the law, that we might receive adoption to sonship. Because you are his sons, God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, the Spirit who calls out, “Abba, Father.” So you are no longer a slave, but God’s child; and since you are his child, God has made you also an heir.”* (Gal 4: 1-7)

Despite Paul’s loving care and powerful witness and preaching, the Galatians have succomed to the false teachings of the “zealous” preachers who preach falsehood, and not the gospel. Paul wonders how this could have happened when their grounding in the truth of the gospel seemed so solid: *“Formerly, when you did not know God, you were slaves to those who by nature are not gods. But now that you know God—or rather are known by God—how is it that you are turning back to those weak and miserable forces[d]? Do you wish to be enslaved by them all over again? You are observing special days and months and seasons and years! I fear for you, that somehow I have wasted my efforts on you.”* (Gal 4:8-11).

“Just because these folks are “zealous” doesn’t mean that they are influencing you for good”, Paul seems to be saying to the church. He argues this way: *“Those people are zealous to win you over, but for no good. What they want is to alienate you from us, so that you may have zeal for them. It is fine to be zealous, provided the purpose is good, and to be so always, not just when I am with you. My dear children, for whom I am again in the pains of childbirth until Christ is formed in you, how I wish I could be with you now and change my tone, because I am perplexed about you!”* (Gal. 4:17-20)

For those who would lizsten to the “zealots” who wished to imprison them in the Law. Paul points out in an analogy that the church is like the child of Sarah- a child of the promise, whereas the “zealots” and those who follow them are children of Hagar, of the Law. The results of this line of descent are radically different: *“Tell me, you who want to be under the law, are you not aware of what the law says? For it is written that Abraham had two sons, one by the slave woman and the other by the free woman. His son by the slave woman was born according to the flesh, but his son by the free woman was born as the result of a divine promise.”* (Gal. 4:21-23). So Paul is asking them directly- do you want to be heirs of the promise or of the flesh and the Law?

There are serious consequences in being a child of the “slave woman” and of the Law and the flesh- these people are to be “gotten rid of”- removed from the presence of God and His people:
“Now you, brothers and sisters, like Isaac, are children of promise. At that time the son born according to the flesh persecuted the son born by the power of the Spirit. It is the same now. But what does Scripture say? “Get rid of the slave woman and her son, for the slave woman’s son will never share in the inheritance with the free woman’s son.” Therefore, brothers and sisters, we are not children of the slave woman, but of the free woman.” (Gal 4:28-31)



http://biblechallenge.salvationarmy.org.uk/galatians-4-so-you-are-no-longer-slave-god%E2%80%99s-child-and-you-are-his-child-god-has-made-you-also-heir

Isaiah 10-12 September 27, 2014 Galatians 5

God’s interst is always in justice- for those who can afford it- as well as the disadvantages, the powerless, those with no particular means to affect the outcome of events, the homelss, the forgotten, the ill, the children and orphans- all who cry out for justice. They have a strong advocate in the Father! Isaiah tells of the woes that wll befall the oppressors- woes from God’s own hand:
“Woe to those who make unjust laws,
to those who issue oppressive decrees,
2 to deprive the poor of their rights
and withhold justice from the oppressed of my people,
making widows their prey
and robbing the fatherless.
3 What will you do on the day of reckoning,
when disaster comes from afar?
To whom will you run for help?
Where will you leave your riches?
4 Nothing will remain but to cringe among the captives
or fall among the slain.
Yet for all this, his anger is not turned away,

his hand is still upraised." (Isaiah 10:1-4)

There is also "woe" for Assyria, the tool that God used to punish Judah. God notices all things, and He noticed the proud and self-important attitude of the king of Assyria, who follishly thought the destruction wrought by Assyria was due only to that nations' military power and leadership:

"Woe to the Assyrian, the rod of my anger,
in whose hand is the club of my wrath!
6 I send him against a godless nation,
I dispatch him against a people who anger me,
to seize loot and snatch plunder,
and to trample them down like mud in the streets.
7 But this is not what he intends,
this is not what he has in mind;
his purpose is to destroy,
to put an end to many nations.
8 'Are not my commanders all kings?' he says.
9 'Has not Kalno fared like Carchemish?
Is not Hamath like Arpad,
and Samaria like Damascus?
10 As my hand seized the kingdoms of the idols,
kingdoms whose images excelled those of Jerusalem and Samaria—
11 shall I not deal with Jerusalem and her images
as I dealt with Samaria and her idols?'"
12 When the Lord has finished all his work against Mount Zion and Jerusalem, he will say, "I will punish the king of Assyria for the willful pride of his heart and the haughty look in his eyes. 13 For he says:
"'By the strength of my hand I have done this,
and by my wisdom, because I have understanding.
I removed the boundaries of nations,
I plundered their treasures;
like a mighty one I subdued[a] their kings.
14 As one reaches into a nest,
so my hand reached for the wealth of the nations;
as people gather abandoned eggs,
so I gathered all the countries;
not one flapped a wing,
or opened its mouth to chirp.'"
15 Does the ax raise itself above the person who swings it,
or the saw boast against the one who uses it?
As if a rod were to wield the person who lifts it up,
or a club brandish the one who is not wood!
16 Therefore, the Lord, the Lord Almighty,
will send a wasting disease upon his sturdy warriors;
under his pomp a fire will be kindled
like a blazing flame.
17 The Light of Israel will become a fire,
their Holy One a flame;
in a single day it will burn and consume
his thorns and his briers." (Isaiah 10:5-17)

There is hope- for the “remnant” of Judah who survived the military conquest and who have kept true to their allegiance, faith and hope in God. This has been the story of God’s people down through the years- the “faithful remnant” has survived pograms, death camps, imprisonment and countless insults and outrages against them:

“In that day the remnant of Israel,
the survivors of Jacob,
will no longer rely on him
who struck them down
but will truly rely on the Lord,
the Holy One of Israel.
21 A remnant will return,[b] a remnant of Jacob
will return to the Mighty God.” (Isaiah 10:20-21)

Isaiah 11 contains another Messianic prophesy, this one centered on the “Shhot from the Root of Jesse” who will rule over an earth where the “lion and the lamb” will live together in peace, in the New Heaven and New Earth (Rev. 21-22). The Shoot from the Root of Jesse will be a “banner” to all the nations

“A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse;
from his roots a Branch will bear fruit.
2 The Spirit of the Lord will rest on him—
the Spirit of wisdom and of understanding,
the Spirit of counsel and of might,
the Spirit of the knowledge and fear of the Lord—
3 and he will delight in the fear of the Lord.
He will not judge by what he sees with his eyes,
or decide by what he hears with his ears;
4 but with righteousness he will judge the needy,
with justice he will give decisions for the poor of the earth.
He will strike the earth with the rod of his mouth;
with the breath of his lips he will slay the wicked.
5 Righteousness will be his belt
and faithfulness the sash around his waist.
6 The wolf will live with the lamb,
the leopard will lie down with the goat,
the calf and the lion and the yearling[d] together;
and a little child will lead them.
7 The cow will feed with the bear,
their young will lie down together,
and the lion will eat straw like the ox.
8 The infant will play near the cobra’s den,
and the young child will put its hand into the viper’s nest.
9 They will neither harm nor destroy
on all my holy mountain,
for the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the Lord
as the waters cover the sea.
10 In that day the Root of Jesse will stand as a banner for the peoples; the nations will rally to him, and his resting place will be glorious. 11 In that day the Lord will reach out his hand a second time to reclaim the surviving remnant of his people

from Assyria, from Lower Egypt, from Upper Egypt, from Cush,[e] from Elam, from Babylonia,[f] from Hamath and from the islands of the Mediterranean." (Isa. 11:1-11)

The Lord will dry up the Egyptian sea and provide a highway for His people. Some think this withering fiece heat that would be required to accomplish this might come from thermonuclear weapons, fired as a part of the Final Battle:

"The Lord will dry up
the gulf of the Egyptian sea;
with a scorching wind he will sweep his hand
over the Euphrates River.
He will break it up into seven streams
so that anyone can cross over in sandals.
16 There will be a highway for the remnant of his people
that is left from Assyria,
as there was for Israel
when they came up from Egypt." (Isa. 11:15-16)

Despite this descruction, there will be endless praise for the Lord, the Holy One of Israel:

In that day you will say:
"I will praise you, Lord.
Although you were angry with me,
your anger has turned away
and you have comforted me.
2 Surely God is my salvation;
I will trust and not be afraid.
The Lord, the Lord himself, is my strength and my defense[h];
he has become my salvation."
3 With joy you will draw water
from the wells of salvation.
4 In that day you will say:
"Give praise to the Lord, proclaim his name;
make known among the nations what he has done,
and proclaim that his name is exalted.
5 Sing to the Lord, for he has done glorious things;
let this be known to all the world.
6 Shout aloud and sing for joy, people of Zion,
for great is the Holy One of Israel among you." (Isa. 12:1-6)

Galatians 5

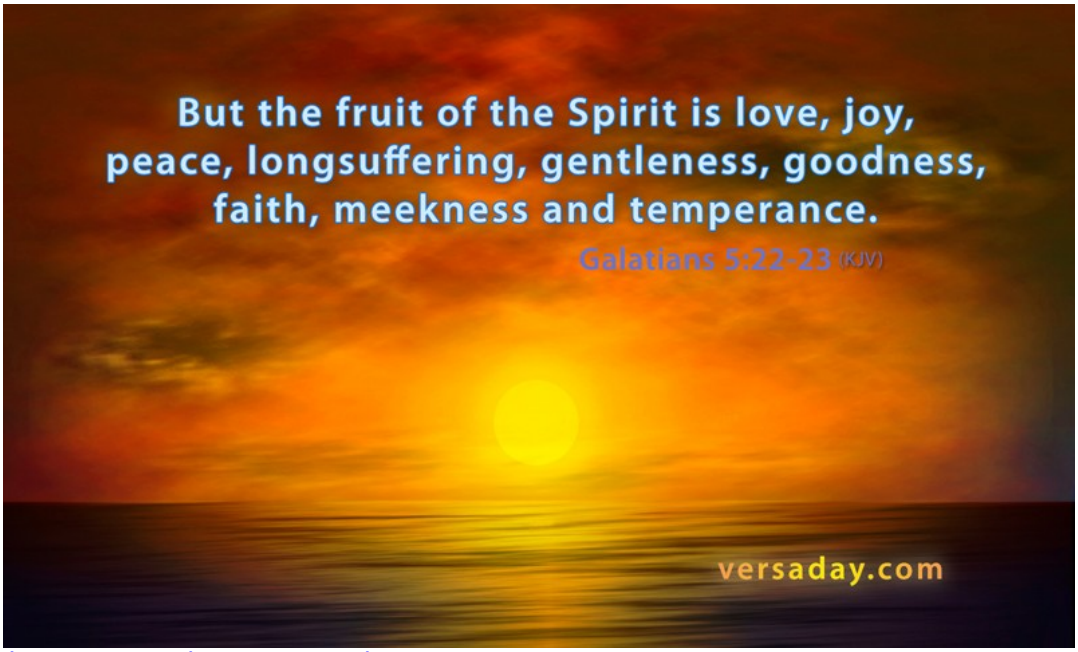
Freedom in Christ! Realizing that He is the great Liberator from guilt and sin, from sorrow and depression, from anger and self-blame- what a great and liberating truth. Paul wants to be absolutely certain that the Galations both realize and treasure such a gift*:"It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery."* (Gal. 5:1).

Paul has nothing but contempt for those who would deceive the family of God and try to "reenslave" them in the Law*: "You were running a good race. Who cut in on you to keep you from obeying the truth? 8 That kind of persuasion does not come from the one who calls you. 9 "A little yeast works through the whole batch of*

dough.” 10 I am confident in the Lord that you will take no other view. The one who is throwing you into confusion, whoever that may be, will have to pay the penalty. 11 Brothers and sisters, if I am still preaching circumcision, why am I still being persecuted? In that case the offense of the cross has been abolished. 12 As for those agitators, I wish they would go the whole way and emasculate themselves!” (Gal. 5:7-12)

What does the Life on the Spirit look like? We so seldom see it, or see it and don’t realize what we have seen, but it is marked by several distinct characteristics and qualities: *“You, my brothers and sisters, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the flesh[a]; rather, serve one another humbly in love. 14 For the entire law is fulfilled in keeping this one command: “Love your neighbor as yourself.”[b] 15 If you bite and devour each other, watch out or you will be destroyed by each other. 16 So I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh. 17 For the flesh desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the flesh. They are in conflict with each other, so that you are not to do whatever[c] you want. 18 But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law.”* (Gal. 5:13-18)

The life in the Spirit precludes the obvious sins: *“The acts of the flesh are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; 20 idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions 21 and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like. I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God.”* (Gal. 5:19-21). The contrast with the life in the Spirit (and not in the “flesh”) is very clear and illuminating. Those who live by the very Spirit of God are “godly” – loving, forgiving, slow to anger and full of mercy and grace, just as He is: *“But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, 23 gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law. 24 Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. 25 Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit. 26 Let us not become conceited, provoking and envying each other.”* (Gal. 5:22-26)



https://versaday.com/Months/12/1210.aspx

Isaiah 13-15 September 28, 2014 Galatians 6

Restoration of Israel/Judah- punishment for her enemies whom God had used for correction. This is the theme of this section of Isaiah. In Chapter 13 we see a vivid description of the prophecy against Babylon. This mighty nation captured and exiled a large portion of the people, but the time is coming says the Lord that this nation will feel the might of the Lord in correction and punishment:

“Listen, a noise on the mountains,
like that of a great multitude!
Listen, an uproar among the kingdoms,
like nations massing together!
The Lord Almighty is mustering
an army for war.
5 They come from faraway lands,
from the ends of the heavens—
the Lord and the weapons of his wrath—
to destroy the whole country.
6 Wail, for the day of the Lord is near;
it will come like destruction from the Almighty.[a]
7 Because of this, all hands will go limp,
every heart will melt with fear.
8 Terror will seize them,
pain and anguish will grip them;
they will writhe like a woman in labor.
They will look aghast at each other,
their faces aflame.
9 See, the day of the Lord is coming
—a cruel day, with wrath and fierce anger—
to make the land desolate

and destroy the sinners within it." (Isa. 13:4-9)

God's instrument of choice in this punishment will be the Medes, who "have no delight in gold" (verse 17):

"See, I will stir up against them the Medes,
who do not care for silver
and have no delight in gold.
18 Their bows will strike down the young men;
they will have no mercy on infants,
nor will they look with compassion on children.
19 Babylon, the jewel of kingdoms,
the pride and glory of the Babylonians,[b]
will be overthrown by God
like Sodom and Gomorrah.
20 She will never be inhabited
or lived in through all generations;
there no nomads will pitch their tents,
there no shepherds will rest their flocks.
21 But desert creatures will lie there,
jackals will fill her houses;
there the owls will dwell,
and there the wild goats will leap about." (Isa. 13:17-21)

God will have compassion on His people, and restore them- the captors will then become captives:

"The Lord will have compassion on Jacob;
once again he will choose Israel
and will settle them in their own land.
Foreigners will join them
and unite with the descendants of Jacob.
2 Nations will take them
and bring them to their own place.
And Israel will take possession of the nations
and make them male and female servants in the Lord's land.
They will make captives of their captors
and rule over their oppressors." (Isa. 14:1-2)

The people of God will taunt their former captors, and describe in vivid images how desperate their plight will be under God's might wrath:

"How the oppressor has come to an end!
How his fury[c] has ended!
5 The Lord has broken the rod of the wicked,
the scepter of the rulers,
6 which in anger struck down peoples
with unceasing blows,
and in fury subdued nations
with relentless aggression.
7 All the lands are at rest and at peace;
they break into singing.
8 Even the junipers and the cedars of Lebanon
gloat over you and say,
"Now that you have been laid low,
no one comes to cut us down."

9 The realm of the dead below is all astir
to meet you at your coming;
it rouses the spirits of the departed to greet you—
all those who were leaders in the world;
it makes them rise from their thrones—
all those who were kings over the nations.
10 They will all respond,
they will say to you,
“You also have become weak, as we are;
you have become like us.”
11 All your pomp has been brought down to the grave,
along with the noise of your harps;
maggots are spread out beneath you
and worms cover you.” (Isa. 14:4-11)

Then follows a prophecy that has at least two major interpretations- and certainly many minor variations of the two. The words are written about (and against) the King of Babylon, but the language of this prophecy is clearly pointing to another being as well. Many conservative scholars maintain that this prophecy is a description of Satan/Lucifer/the angel of light:

“How you have fallen from heaven,
morning star, son of the dawn!
You have been cast down to the earth,
you who once laid low the nations!
13 You said in your heart,
“I will ascend to the heavens;
I will raise my throne
above the stars of God;
I will sit enthroned on the mount of assembly,
on the utmost heights of Mount Zaphon.[d]
14 I will ascend above the tops of the clouds;
I will make myself like the Most High.”
15 But you are brought down to the realm of the dead,
to the depths of the pit.” (Isa. 14:12-15)

The phrase “morning star” in verse 12 can also be rendered “Lucifer”- in fact the New King James Version of the Scriptures lists this section as “The Fall of Lucifer”. The rejection from heaven, described here, is often joined with the passage in Ezekiel (28:12-19) to explain and summarize the history of this created being, who was (and is) an intelligent and prideful creature who once stood with the angels, but led many of them in rebellion. The capstone verse in the Isaiah passage is verse 14 -*”I will make myself like the Most High”.* This overarching pride was the ultimate source of rebellion and expulsion from heaven.

Isaiah concludes that there is no power on earth or heaven that can thwart the power and will of God:

“This is the plan determined for the whole world;
this is the hand stretched out over all nations.
27 For the Lord Almighty has purposed, and who can thwart him?
His hand is stretched out, and who can turn it back?” (Isa. 14:26-27)

A prophecy is then issued against the Philistines, the constant enemy and “hateful neighbor” of God’s people:

“Do not rejoice, all you Philistines,
that the rod that struck you is broken;
from the root of that snake will spring up a viper,
its fruit will be a darting, venomous serpent.
30 The poorest of the poor will find pasture,
and the needy will lie down in safety.
But your root I will destroy by famine;
it will slay your survivors.
31 Wail, you gate! Howl, you city!
Melt away, all you Philistines!
A cloud of smoke comes from the north,
and there is not a straggler in its ranks.
32 What answer shall be given
to the envoys of that nation?
“The Lord has established Zion,
and in her his afflicted people will find refuge.” (Isa. 14:29-32)

This section of Isaiah concludes with a prophecy against Moab, another “bad neighbor” of Israel:

“A prophecy against Moab:
Ar in Moab is ruined,
destroyed in a night!
Kir in Moab is ruined,
destroyed in a night!
2 Dibon goes up to its temple,
to its high places to weep;
Moab wails over Nebo and Medeba.
Every head is shaved
and every beard cut off.
3 In the streets they wear sackcloth;
on the roofs and in the public squares
they all wail,
prostrate with weeping.
4 Heshbon and Elealeh cry out,
their voices are heard all the way to Jahaz.
Therefore the armed men of Moab cry out,
and their hearts are faint.
5 My heart cries out over Moab;
her fugitives flee as far as Zoar,
as far as Eglath Shelishiyah.
They go up the hill to Luhith,
weeping as they go;
on the road to Horonaim
they lament their destruction.” (Isa. 15:1-5)

Ar, Kir and Dibon are “place names” of cities in ancient Moab (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kir_of_Moab) The prophet sees the grat distress that is to come to Maob, and has compassion for them *“my heart cries out over Moab”* (verse 5).

Galatians 6

And now for some very practical parting words to the church in Galatia. The tendency of some of us is to "rescue" a brother or sister who has fallen into sin, and sometimes "go where they are" to help them. We might go to a bar, a casino, or other "place of sin" to rescue them, but we must be careful not to become tempted ourselves. Much discernment and wisdom is needed! Paul writes: *"Brothers and sisters, if someone is caught in a sin, you who live by the Spirit should restore that person gently. But watch yourselves, or you also may be tempted."* (Gal. 6:1)

The King James translation of the next advice to the church is rendered *"Bear ye one another's burdens...."* (Gal. 6:2 KJV) The great truth here is that we are called to, and empowered to, do just that! We can greatly help another child of God by being willing to "share and bear" the troubles and problems they are burdened with- thre is great power- and a wonderful linkage- that happens when we step up and help each other! Paul goes on to explain that we should not be "too proud" of our own accomplishments- comparing only to ourselves (or ultimately to the Savior!) and not to others, and we should share insights and Words we receive: *"Carry each other's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ. 3 If anyone thinks they are something when they are not, they deceive themselves. 4 Each one should test their own actions. Then they can take pride in themselves alone, without comparing themselves to someone else, 5 for each one should carry their own load. 6 Nevertheless, the one who receives instruction in the word should share all good things with their instructor."* (Gal. 6:2-6)

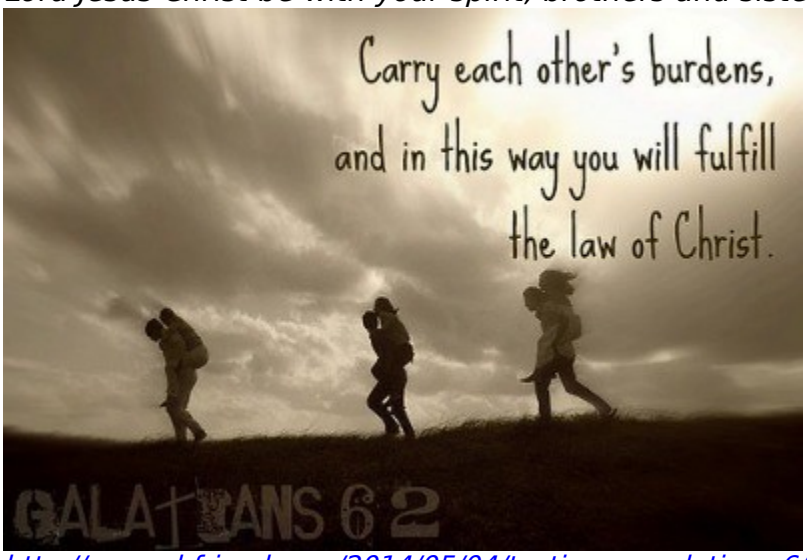
Things have consequences- actions, attitudes, and "thinking" all are inextricably linked with results- kind of like the law of physics which states "for every action there is a reaction". We cannot "game" the moral system and simply do what we want, when we want, without consequences. The subtle thing here is that the consequences may be long in coming, and not obviously linked to their corresponding actions- but they will inevitably come*: "Do not be deceived: God cannot be mocked. A man reaps what he sows. 8 Whoever sows to please their flesh, from the flesh will reap destruction; whoever sows to please the Spirit, from the Spirit will reap eternal life. 9 Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up. 10 Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers."* (Gal 6:7-10). I am reminded literally "over and over" by God about verse 9- *"Let us not be weary in doing good"*. Sometimes it seems that I become so busy with "the work of the Lord"- especially in the organized church, that I lose sight of the "Lord of the work". We should- and can- do everything as "unto the Lord" (Col. 3:23-24).

I have always enjoyed someone who could see humor even in the most serious of human activities. Here is Paul, writing an important letter, remarking at the "size of his handwriting"! I wonder if he was becoming nearsighted –or more likely farsighted with age, or was simply commenting that he was writing instead of dictating this letter. Either way, it is a moment to be treasured: *"See what large letters I use as I write to you with my own hand!"* (Gal. 6:11)

Then we see a more serious comment about those "Judaizers" who are insisting on circumcision- in Paul's opinion they are doing this to "avoid persecution"- perhaps

by “appearing” to be Jews at least outwardly in the flesh: *“Those who want to impress people by means of the flesh are trying to compel you to be circumcised. The only reason they do this is to avoid being persecuted for the cross of Christ. 13 Not even those who are circumcised keep the law, yet they want you to be circumcised that they may boast about your circumcision in the flesh. 14 May I never boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which[a] the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world. 15 Neither circumcision nor uncircumcision means anything; what counts is the new creation. 16 Peace and mercy to all who follow this rule—to[b] the Israel of God.”* (Gal. 6:12-16). Paul hammers the point home again- what counts is not the flesh or circumcision but the New Creation that was made when Jesus came to live with us and to save us! The *“Israel of God”* most likely refers to the church in Galatia- the name of the church (please see: http://www.bible-researcher.com/gal6-16.html).

In his parting words, Paul reminds the church of his suffering for the gospel, and wishes and prays for them to enjoy the peace of God: *“From now on, let no one cause me trouble, for I bear on my body the marks of Jesus. 18 The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit, brothers and sisters. Amen.”* (Gal. 6:17-18)



http://www.ubfriends.org/2014/05/04/testimony-galatians-6/

Isaiah 16-18 September 29, 2014 Ephesians 1

Prophecies of doom and gloom! Who wants to hear them…or who wants to proclaim them? Yet Isaiah was obedient and faithfully proclaimed the terrifying

visions that God gave him- saying “thus says the Lord”. The destruction of Moab is attributed to her pride, and is complete and devastating:
“We have heard of Moab’s pride—
how great is her arrogance!—
of her conceit, her pride and her insolence;
but her boasts are empty.
7 Therefore the Moabites wail,
they wail together for Moab.
Lament and grieve
for the raisin cakes of Kir Hareseth.
8 The fields of Heshbon wither,
the vines of Sibmah also.
The rulers of the nations
have trampled down the choicest vines,
which once reached Jazer
and spread toward the desert.
Their shoots spread out
and went as far as the sea.[b]
9 So I weep, as Jazer weeps,
for the vines of Sibmah.
Heshbon and Elealeh,
I drench you with tears!
The shouts of joy over your ripened fruit
and over your harvests have been stilled.
10 Joy and gladness are taken away from the orchards;
no one sings or shouts in the vineyards;
no one treads out wine at the presses,
for I have put an end to the shouting.
11 My heart laments for Moab like a harp,
my inmost being for Kir Hareseth.
12 When Moab appears at her high place,
she only wears herself out;
when she goes to her shrine to pray,
it is to no avail.” (Isa. 16:6-12)

Then God gives Isaiah a “word”- a revelation as to the destruction that will befall her:
“This is the word the LORD has already spoken concerning Moab. 14 But now the LORD says: “Within three years, as a servant bound by contract would count them, Moab’s splendor and all her many people will be despised, and her survivors will be very few and feeble.” (Isa. 16:13-14)

Damascus is one of earth’s oldest cities. The destruction that is prophesied for her is devastating as well. Israel will share in this desrtruction, for Israel has also been unfaithful. Some scholars and students of Scripture believe that this part of Isaiah is a “very long term” prophecy, which will be fulfilled completely only at the “end of the age” during the events described in Revalation- the last battle at Armageddon (http://www.raptureready.com/featured/gillette/Isaiah_17.html)
“A prophecy against Damascus:

“See, Damascus will no longer be a city
but will become a heap of ruins.
2 The cities of Aroer will be deserted
and left to flocks, which will lie down,
with no one to make them afraid.
3 The fortified city will disappear from Ephraim,
and royal power from Damascus;
the remnant of Aram will be
like the glory of the Israelites,”
declares the Lord Almighty.
4 “In that day the glory of Jacob will fade;
the fat of his body will waste away.
5 It will be as when reapers harvest the standing grain,
gathering the grain in their arms—
as when someone gleans heads of grain
in the Valley of Rephaim.
6 Yet some gleanings will remain,
as when an olive tree is beaten,
leaving two or three olives on the topmost branches,
four or five on the fruitful boughs,”
declares the Lord, the God of Israel.
7 In that day people will look to their Maker
and turn their eyes to the Holy One of Israel.
8 They will not look to the altars,
the work of their hands,
and they will have no regard for the Asherah poles[a]
and the incense altars their fingers have made.” (Isa. 17:1-8)

Notice that the “glory of Jacob/Israel will fade” (verse 4)- which is a clear prophecy that Israel as well as Damascus will be severly punished for her unfaithfulness. The desired result of this punishment is correction- notice that God sees His people (finally!) turning away from the path of destruction they are on and look to Him for guidance and direction *(“In that day people will look to their Maker and turn their eyes to the Holy One of Israel”*- verse 7) God very carefully and patiently explains why this destruction is taking place- this is not the rage of a primitive and vengeful creator, this is the righteous anger- aimed at correction and discipline- of a loving God:

“In that day their strong cities, which they left because of the Israelites, will be like places abandoned to thickets and undergrowth. And all will be desolation.

10 You have forgotten God your Savior;
you have not remembered the Rock, your fortress.
Therefore, though you set out the finest plants
and plant imported vines,
11 though on the day you set them out, you make them grow,
and on the morning when you plant them, you bring them to bud,
yet the harvest will be as nothing
in the day of disease and incurable pain.
12 Woe to the many nations that rage—
they rage like the raging sea!
Woe to the peoples who roar—

they roar like the roaring of great waters!
13 Although the peoples roar like the roar of surging waters,
when he rebukes them they flee far away,
driven before the wind like chaff on the hills,
like tumbleweed before a gale.
14 In the evening, sudden terror!
Before the morning, they are gone!
This is the portion of those who loot us,
the lot of those who plunder us." (Isa. 17:9-14).

The reason for this destruction is spelled out very clearly- *"You have forgotten God your Savior; you have not remembered the Rock, your fortress."* (Isa. 17:10) Chapter 18 of Isaiah is a prophecy against Cush. In the next chapter we see a prophecy against Egypt. Since North Africa is "generically" referred to as Cush, it may be helpful to look at some ancient geography. The following figure illustrates the location of Cush- just south of modern Egypt and about where the desert of Sudan is located:

This prophecy is similar to the two we have just examined:
"Woe to the land of whirring wings[a]
along the rivers of Cush,[b]
2 which sends envoys by sea
in papyrus boats over the water.
Go, swift messengers,
to a people tall and smooth-skinned,
to a people feared far and wide,
an aggressive nation of strange speech,
whose land is divided by rivers.
3 All you people of the world,
you who live on the earth,
when a banner is raised on the mountains,
you will see it,

and when a trumpet sounds,
you will hear it.
4 This is what the Lord says to me:
"I will remain quiet and will look on from my dwelling place,
like shimmering heat in the sunshine,
like a cloud of dew in the heat of harvest."
5 For, before the harvest, when the blossom is gone
and the flower becomes a ripening grape,
he will cut off the shoots with pruning knives,
and cut down and take away the spreading branches.
6 They will all be left to the mountain birds of prey
and to the wild animals;
the birds will feed on them all summer,
the wild animals all winter." (Isa. 18:1-6).
The destruction here is not as graphic or complete, and there is offered hope of a redemption, and an end to the punishment and correction of these people when they tuirn to God in worship:
"At that time gifts will be brought to the Lord Almighty
from a people tall and smooth-skinned,
from a people feared far and wide,
an aggressive nation of strange speech,
whose land is divided by rivers—
the gifts will be brought to Mount Zion, the place of the Name of the Lord Almighty." (Isa. 18:17) The meaning of much of this chapter of Isaiah remains relatively obscure, as has been noted in many of the commentaries (http://biblehub.com/commentaries/isaiah/18-1.htm).

Ephesians 1

Paul writes to the church in Ephesus, one of the cities mentioned in the Revelation to John. This city is located in what is now modern Turkey, near the present day city of Selcuk (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ephesus). Tradition says this letter was written to the church while Paul was imprisoned in Rome.

As is typical of the other Pauline letter, this one starts with a warm greeting and blessing from Paul: Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, To God's holy people in Ephesus,[a] the faithful in Christ Jesus: 2 Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ." (Eph. 1:1-2).

Paul's focus then becomes more global, as he reflects on the great works that God has accomplished: *"Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ. 4 For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love 5 he[b] predestined us for adoption to sonship[c] through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will— 6 to the praise of his glorious grace, which he has freely given us in the One he loves. 7 In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God's grace 8 that he lavished on us. With all wisdom and understanding, 9 he[d] made known to us the mystery of his will according to his good pleasure, which he purposed in Christ, 10 to be put into effect when the times reach their fulfillment—*

to bring unity to all things in heaven and on earth under Christ. 11 In him we were also chosen,[e] having been predestined according to the plan of him who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will, 12 in order that we, who were the first to put our hope in Christ, might be for the praise of his glory." (Eph. 1:3-12) Here we find perhaps the most specific reference to Giod having "predestined" our "adoption and sonship" (verse 5), an act he accomplished "before the creation of the world" (verse 4). The doctrinal body of beliefs known as Calvinism was created out of these and similar references. Having been an "amateur Presbyterian" once, I was tained in the Five Points of Calvinism and had the opportunity to examine and study Scriptures that were not emphasized (or were glossed over) in my Wesleyan/Arminian background. I would not dream of entering into a long theological discussion on the relative mertits of these two distinct theologies. Suffice it to say that I enjoyed my experience in the Presbyterian Church (PCA) simply because the rich and supportive fellowship and love of the Lord Jesus among the congregation I was a member of. God was certainly present among His people in that congregation!

Like any good pastor, Paul gives thanks for the faith- and faithfulness- of God's people in that church: *"For this reason, ever since I heard about your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love for all God's people, 16 I have not stopped giving thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers. 17 I keep asking that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Father, may give you the Spirit[f] of wisdom and revelation, so that you may know him better. 18 I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in his holy people, 19 and his incomparably great power for us who believe."* (Eph. 1:15-19). One of the most precious phrases to me in this passage is Paul's prayer that "the eyes of your heart" would be enlightened. That is a powerful image- certainly to me- and suggests that the most real part of us is able to "see" and receive sight from our loving Creator God- that we can "see Jesus"! This is the inspiration for one of my favorite contemporary worship songs by Michael W. Smith- "Open the Eyes of My Heart".
"Open The Eyes Of My Heart"

Open the eyes of my heart, Lord
Open the eyes of my heart
I want to see You
I want to see You

Open the eyes of my heart, Lord
Open the eyes of my heart
I want to see You
I want to see You

To see You high and lifted up
Shinin' in the light of Your glory
Pour out Your power and love
As we sing holy, holy, holy! (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O1Fz1rviXFU)

Isaiah 19-21 **September 30, 2014** **Ephesians 2**

Isaiah also issued a prophecy against Egypt- then and now in North Africa. The Lord's wordas are harsh and unrelenting. The Egyptians are pagan- they "consult" idols and the spirits of the dead"- practices that God has said many times that he detests:

A prophecy against Egypt:

"See, the Lord rides on a swift cloud
and is coming to Egypt.
The idols of Egypt tremble before him,
and the hearts of the Egyptians melt with fear.
2 "I will stir up Egyptian against Egyptian—
brother will fight against brother,
neighbor against neighbor,
city against city,
kingdom against kingdom.
3 The Egyptians will lose heart,
and I will bring their plans to nothing;
they will consult the idols and the spirits of the dead,
the mediums and the spiritists.
4 I will hand the Egyptians over
to the power of a cruel master,
and a fierce king will rule over them,"
declares the Lord, the Lord Almighty." (Isa. 19:1-4)

God promises to "dry up" the Nile river, the very lifeblood of Egypt- the waters upon which commerce, agriculture and the very economy of Egypt depend:

"The waters of the river will dry up,
and the riverbed will be parched and dry.
6 The canals will stink;
the streams of Egypt will dwindle and dry up.
The reeds and rushes will wither,
7 also the plants along the Nile,
at the mouth of the river.
Every sown field along the Nile
will become parched, will blow away and be no more.
8 The fishermen will groan and lament,
all who cast hooks into the Nile;
those who throw nets on the water
will pine away.
9 Those who work with combed flax will despair,
the weavers of fine linen will lose hope.
10 The workers in cloth will be dejected,
and all the wage earners will be sick at heart." (Isa. 19:5-10)

Once again there is hope- God is not punishing Egypt to be vengeful (although he has every right to!) but in order to reclaim them- to show them the truth and the pattern of true belief and worship of the One True God: *"In that day five cities in Egypt will speak the language of Canaan and swear allegiance to the Lord Almighty. One of them will be called the City of the Sun.19 In that day there will be an altar to the Lord in the heart of Egypt, and a monument to the Lord at its border. 20 It will be a sign and witness to the Lord Almighty in the land of Egypt. When they cry out to the Lord because of their oppressors, he will send them a savior and defender, and he will rescue them. 21 So the Lord will make himself known to the Egyptians,*

and in that day they will acknowledge the Lord. They will worship with sacrifices and grain offerings; they will make vows to the Lord and keep them. 22 The Lord will strike Egypt with a plague; he will strike them and heal them. They will turn to the Lord, and he will respond to their pleas and heal them." (Isa. 19:18-22)

Isaiah is then told to "act out" the next prophesy against both Cush and Egypt. Those in Judah who chose to depend on them instead of the Lord will be shown how foolish their dependence was. This in some ways is similar to the prophet fathering a son with the "prophetess"- his wife in Isaiah 8:3. We will see similar "acting out" by a prophet in Ezekiel (4:4). Isaiah was stripped of his clothing, just as the people were stripped of hope and strength*: "In the year that the supreme commander, sent by Sargon king of Assyria, came to Ashdod and attacked and captured it— 2 at that time the Lord spoke through Isaiah son of Amoz. He said to him, "Take off the sackcloth from your body and the sandals from your feet." And he did so, going around stripped and barefoot."* (Isa. 20:1-2) God explains how this dramatic event underscores the foolishness of dependence on an army and not the God of the universe: *"Those who trusted in Cush and boasted in Egypt will be dismayed and put to shame. 6 In that day the people who live on this coast will say, 'See what has happened to those we relied on, those we fled to for help and deliverance from the king of Assyria! How then can we escape?'"* (Isa. 20:5-6)

The mighty nation Babylon, who was to capture and exile the people of Judah and act as God's instrument of discipline, is prophesied against as well. The images are so terrifying that Isaiah literally feels sick:

"At this my body is racked with pain,
pangs seize me, like those of a woman in labor;
I am staggered by what I hear,
I am bewildered by what I see.
4 My heart falters,
fear makes me tremble;
the twilight I longed for
has become a horror to me." (Isaiah 21:3-4)

Babylon will be completely shattered by the mighty hand of God:

"Look, here comes a man in a chariot
with a team of horses.
And he gives back the answer:
'Babylon has fallen, has fallen!
All the images of its gods
lie shattered on the ground!'" (Isa. 21:9)

This chapter of Isaiah ends with brief prophesies against Edom and Arabia, about which God says: *"This is what the Lord says to me: "Within one year, as a servant bound by contract would count it, all the splendor of Kedar will come to an end. 17 The survivors of the archers, the warriors of Kedar, will be few." The Lord, the God of Israel, has spoken."* (Isa. 21:16-17)

Ephesians 2

It seems especially fitting that I end the third quarter of this journal with a brief look at Ephesians 2. This chapter, along with 1 Corinthians 4- which contains my "life verse"- 1 Cor. 4:20- is a place I find myself again and again. The power of the

words, the comfort of the promises, the astonishing applicability of the images here to my own life is overwhelming. The Scriptures were written to a huge number of listeners over several centuries, but these words seem- again and agin- to have been written somehow "especially for me". Any time I need to be reminded as to my real place in the scheme of things, wher the real power and meaning is, or what an unpayably large debt I owe to God, I come to this chapter.

The chapter is a summary of the Gospel, written in words that stir both the soul and the imagination: *"As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, 2 in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient. 3 All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our flesh[a] and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were by nature deserving of wrath. 4 But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, 5 made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved. 6 And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus, 7 in order that in the coming ages he might show the incomparable riches of his grace, expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus. 8 For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God— 9 not by works, so that no one can boast. 10 For we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do."* (Ephesians 2:1-10)
Ten verses- a short paragraph- full of the story of the Gospel and its amazing redemptive power. One of my favorite "little books" on this chapter is a treasure by Watchman Nee entitled "Sit. Walk, Stand". I was at one time in the practice of buying multiple copies of this little book and distributing them to my special friends. I hope it was a blessing to them!

The beginning of this section could be rephrase: "As for you, Dan, you were dead in your transgressions and sins…" How true- how often I have been saddened by the memory of the sins (and the sin nature) that ruins my relationship with the Father and His amazing Son, and blocks His wonderful Spirit from having free reighn in my own life! Verse 4 is a "capstone"- because of God's "great love for us", our God who is "rich in mercy" made us ALIVE!!! Praise His wonderful name- there is life- true, free and abundant in Him. Happy and joyful is the one who allows God to love them this way. My only "pause" in this section of the letter comes in verse 10, which comes dangerously close to Calvinistic predestination (apologies to all who might read this and are Calvinists!).

Paul illustrates the power of God's reconciling love in the joining of two "warring" parties- the Jewish Christians, who sometimes insisted that all become "Jews first" and follow the Law, and the Gentile believers who had no such predisposition. God was, and is, able to join these two seemingly irreconcilable parties by the miraculous healing and restoring power of His love: *"For he himself is our peace, who has made the two groups one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility, 15 by setting aside in his flesh the law with its commands and regulations. His purpose was to create in himself one new humanity out of the two, thus making peace, 16 and in one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility. 17 He came and preached peace to you who were far away and peace to those who were near. 18 For through him we*

both have access to the Father by one Spirit." (Ephesians 2:14-18). We are always to remember- and live- the truth the "He Himself is our peace" (verse 14). We are joined by "one Spirit" (verse 18).

The wonderful consequence of all this is that we- Gentiles and Jews, believers and formerly unbelievers- are being built into a new reality- the Church- in which God Himself is pleased to dwell- this is the temple "not built with hands" (Acts 7:48; 17:24): *"Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and strangers, but fellow citizens with God's people and also members of his household, 20 built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. 21 In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. 22 And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit."* (Ephesians 2:19-22)

Ephesians 2:1-10

And although you were **dead** in your **transgressions** and **sins**, in which you formerly
lived according to this world's present path, according to the ruler of the
kingdom of the air, the ruler of the spirit that is now energizing
the **sons of disobedience**, among whom all of us also
formerly lived out our lives in the **cravings of**
our **flesh**, indulging the **desires of the flesh**
and the mind, and were by nature
children of wrath even
as the rest
but God
being **rich in**
mercy, because of his
great love with which he loved us,
even though we were dead in transgressions,
made us alive together with Christ – by **grace** you are
saved! And he **raised us up** with him and seated us with him
in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus, to demonstrate in the coming
ages the surpassing **wealth of his grace in kindness** toward us in Christ Jesus.
For **by grace you are saved** through faith, and this is not from yourselves, it is the **gift**
of God; it is not from works, so that no one can boast. For we are his **workmanship**, having
been created in Christ Jesus for **good works** that God prepared beforehand so we may do them.

http://davidleventhal.org/2010/02/02/ephesians-2_1-10/

Isaiah 22-23 October 1, 2014 Ephesians 3

Somilar to the pattern in the book of Amos, the prophesies against neighboring countries are recited, and finally there is a prophesy against Israwl/Judah itself. The people may have felt some justification in seeing their "evil neighbors" reap the results of their disobedience and total disregard for God, but now it is time for Judah to face her consequences as well. Isaiah says:

"The Lord stripped away the defenses of Judah,
and you looked in that day
to the weapons in the Palace of the Forest.
9 You saw that the walls of the City of David
were broken through in many places;
you stored up water
in the Lower Pool.
10 You counted the buildings in Jerusalem

and tore down houses to strengthen the wall.
11 You built a reservoir between the two walls
for the water of the Old Pool,
but you did not look to the One who made it,
or have regard for the One who planned it long ago.
12 The Lord, the Lord Almighty,
called you on that day
to weep and to wail,
to tear out your hair and put on sackcloth.
13 But see, there is joy and revelry,
slaughtering of cattle and killing of sheep,
eating of meat and drinking of wine!
“Let us eat and drink,” you say,
“for tomorrow we die!”
14 The Lord Almighty has revealed this in my hearing: “Till your dying day this sin will not be atoned for,” says the Lord, the Lord Almighty.

15 This is what the Lord, the Lord Almighty, says:

“Go, say to this steward,
to Shebna the palace administrator:
16 What are you doing here and who gave you permission
to cut out a grave for yourself here,
hewing your grave on the height
and chiseling your resting place in the rock?
17 “Beware, the Lord is about to take firm hold of you
and hurl you away, you mighty man.
18 He will roll you up tightly like a ball
and throw you into a large country.
There you will die
and there the chariots you were so proud of
will become a disgrace to your master’s house.
19 I will depose you from your office,
and you will be ousted from your position.” (Isa. 22:8-19)

We then see a prophesy about Eliakim (“resurrection of God”) an official of King Hezekiah (please see http://bibleq.net/answer/5795/). Despite his honorable character and fine leadership, the people will still suffer the consequences of their disobedience: *“In that day I will summon my servant, Eliakim son of Hilkiah. 21 I will clothe him with your robe and fasten your sash around him and hand your authority over to him. He will be a father to those who live in Jerusalem and to the people of Judah. 22 I will place on his shoulder the key to the house of David; what he opens no one can shut, and what he shuts no one can open. 23 I will drive him like a peg into a firm place; he will become a seat[a] of honor for the house of his father. 24 All the glory of his family will hang on him: its offspring and offshoots—all its lesser vessels, from the bowls to all the jars. 25 “In that day,” declares the Lord Almighty, “the peg driven into the firm place will give way; it will be sheared off and will fall, and the load hanging on it will be cut down.” The Lord has spoken.”* (Isa. 22:20-25)

A prophesy against Tyre follows. Tyre (often mentioned with Sidon) was an influential city in what is now Lebanon (please see

http://www.biblearchaeology.org/post/2010/01/26/the-biblical-cities-of-tyre-and-sidon.aspx). Its commerce and fame as a busy seaport were known worldwide. God has some harsh words for this city as well:

A prophecy against Tyre:
"Wail, you ships of Tarshish!
For Tyre is destroyed
and left without house or harbor.
From the land of Cyprus
word has come to them.
2 Be silent, you people of the island
and you merchants of Sidon,
whom the seafarers have enriched.
3 On the great waters
came the grain of the Shihor;
the harvest of the Nile[b] was the revenue of Tyre,
and she became the marketplace of the nations." (Isa. 23:1-3)

Sidon, a nearby city, is also condemned by the Lord:

"Be ashamed, Sidon, and you fortress of the sea,
for the sea has spoken:
"I have neither been in labor nor given birth;
I have neither reared sons nor brought up daughters."
5 When word comes to Egypt,
they will be in anguish at the report from Tyre." (Isa. 23:4-5)

The Lord's long term plans for Tyre include restoring her, but diverting the money she makes to the Lord's use, and not to the people's:

"At that time Tyre will be forgotten for seventy years, the span of a king's life. But at the end of these seventy years, it will happen to Tyre as in the song of the prostitute:
16 "Take up a harp, walk through the city,
you forgotten prostitute;
play the harp well, sing many a song,
so that you will be remembered."
17 At the end of seventy years, the Lord will deal with Tyre. She will return to her lucrative prostitution and will ply her trade with all the kingdoms on the face of the earth. 18 Yet her profit and her earnings will be set apart for the Lord; they will not be stored up or hoarded. Her profits will go to those who live before the Lord, for abundant food and fine clothes." (Isa. 23:15-17)

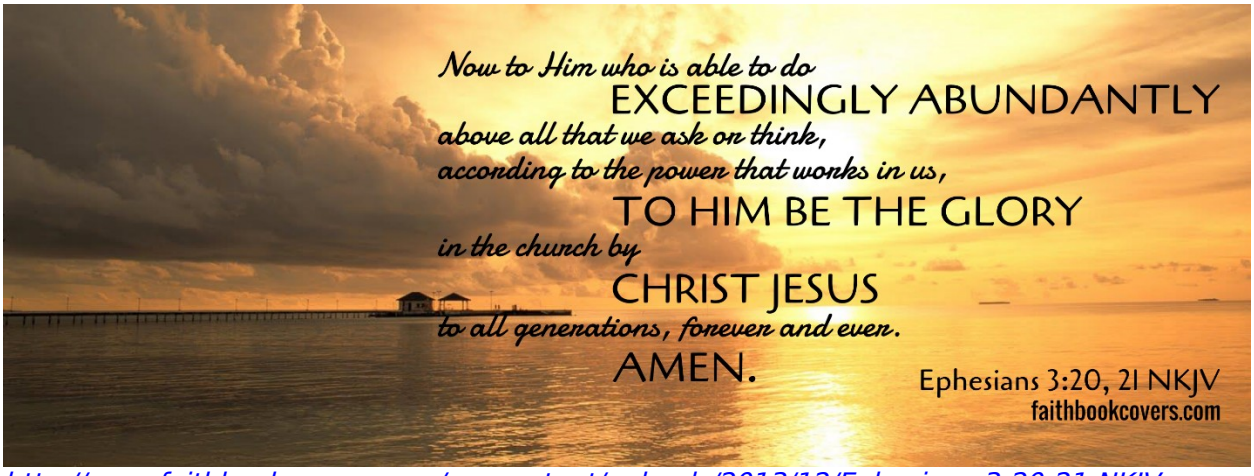
Ephesians 3

Paul realized that God had given him an extraordinary gift, that of preaching to and winning over the Gentiles to the truth of the Gospel. Paul was mutilingual, brilliant, extrmemely well educated, and expert in the law, and had flawless credentials as a Pharisee. Giod used all these gifts, as well as Paul's extraordinary toughness, focus, and intensity of purpose to spread the Good News throughout the ancient world. Paul reviews for the church in Ephesus his own calling and credentailas: *"For this reason I, Paul, the prisoner of Christ Jesus for the sake of you Gentiles—*
Surely you have heard about the administration of God's grace that was given to me for you, that is, the mystery made known to me by revelation, as I have already

written briefly. In reading this, then, you will be able to understand my insight into the mystery of Christ, which was not made known to people in other generations as it has now been revealed by the Spirit to God's holy apostles and prophets. This mystery is that through the gospel the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel, members together of one body, and sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus. I became a servant of this gospel by the gift of God's grace given me through the working of his power. Although I am less than the least of all the Lord's people, this grace was given me: to preach to the Gentiles the boundless riches of Christ, and to make plain to everyone the administration of this mystery, which for ages past was kept hidden in God, who created all things." (Ephesians 3:1-9) Paul reminds those in the church not to be discouraged because of his sufferings for them- these are all part of God's plan and are for the greater good both to Paul and to the church in Ephesus: *"I ask you, therefore, not to be discouraged because of my sufferings for you, which are your glory."* (Ephesians 3:13)

Paul then prays a powerful prayer for the church, and reminds them of the incomparable love and grace that God has generously shared with them*: "For this reason I kneel before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth derives its name. I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the Lord's holy people, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge —that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God."* (Ephesians 3:15-19) We, like the Ephesians, will live a walk with the Lord characterized by power because we are "rooted and established in love" (verse 17).

Paul then gives a benediction that I hear each Sunday, one that I have come to treasure more each time I hear it from pastor Joe Peabody: *"Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen."* (Ephesians 3:20-21). The phrase that captures my soul's imagination more than any other in this benediction is "immeasurably more than we ask or imagine" (verse 20). Just think of that-we can't even imagine the wealth, depth and majestic power of what God wants to do through us. This thought is also captured in another translation of this same Scripture that I also treasure, which I have heard several times in my son Ben's church: *"Now unto him that is able to do exceeding abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the power that worketh in us,*
Unto him be glory in the church by Christ Jesus throughout all ages, world without end. Amen." (Ephesians 3:20-21 KJV). Here the phrase is "exceeding abundantly above all that we ask or think"- equally powerful and beautifully poetic. What a God! What a Savior! Praise His Name!!



http://www.faithbookcovers.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/12/Ephesians-3-20-21-NKJV.png

Isaiah 24-26 October 2, 2014 Ephesians 4

Destruction- of the whole earth (or the land of Judah)- joy from His people. This stark contrast comprises Isaiah 24. The translation of the Hebrew word rendered "earth" in the NIV translation is the hinge upon which the proper interpretation of this chapter rests (please see http://www.2001translation.com/Isaiah24.htm). It seems clear thast this is not a prophesy of Armageddon- which involves destruction of at least aprts of the whole earth, but the "habitation" of God's people- Judah:

"See, the Lord is going to lay waste the earth
and devastate it;
he will ruin its face
and scatter its inhabitants—
2 it will be the same
for priest as for people,
for the master as for his servant,
for the mistress as for her servant,
for seller as for buyer,
for borrower as for lender,
for debtor as for creditor.
3 The earth will be completely laid waste
and totally plundered.
The Lord has spoken this word." (Isaiah 24:1-3)

Those who remain after this destruction are the "faithful ones", the "remnant" mentioned elsewhere in Isaiah (10:21). Why are they singing? They realize that despite this destruction that God is just and righteous, and that He will care for and protect His own:

"They raise their voices, they shout for joy;
from the west they acclaim the Lord's majesty.
15 Therefore in the east give glory to the Lord;
exalt the name of the Lord, the God of Israel,
in the islands of the sea.
16 From the ends of the earth we hear singing:
"Glory to the Righteous One." (Isaiah 24:14-16)

There will be punishment for the unfaithful in other lands as well:

“In that day the Lord will punish
the powers in the heavens above
and the kings on the earth below.
22 They will be herded together
like prisoners bound in a dungeon;
they will be shut up in prison
and be punished[a] after many days.
23 The moon will be dismayed,
the sun ashamed;
for the Lord Almighty will reign
on Mount Zion and in Jerusalem,
and before its elders—with great glory.” (Isaiah 24:21-23)

Great and heartfelt is the praise God receives from His faithful, His righteous ones. They raise their voices and recite the wonderful attributes of their Creator and Defender, the God of all that is:
“Lord, you are my God;
I will exalt you and praise your name,
for in perfect faithfulness
you have done wonderful things,
things planned long ago.
2 You have made the city a heap of rubble,
the fortified town a ruin,
the foreigners’ stronghold a city no more;
it will never be rebuilt.
3 Therefore strong peoples will honor you;
cities of ruthless nations will revere you.
4 You have been a refuge for the poor,
a refuge for the needy in their distress,
a shelter from the storm
and a shade from the heat.
For the breath of the ruthless
is like a storm driving against a wall
5 and like the heat of the desert.
You silence the uproar of foreigners;
as heat is reduced by the shadow of a cloud,
so the song of the ruthless is stilled.” (Isaiah 26:1-5)
God’s prople will give great thanksgiving for His salvation:
“In that day they will say,
“Surely this is our God;
we trusted in him, and he saved us.
This is the Lord, we trusted in him;
let us rejoice and be glad in his salvation.”” (Isaiah 26:9)
Moab will receive its just punishment for unfaithfulness:
“The hand of the Lord will rest on this mountain;
but Moab will be trampled in their land
as straw is trampled down in the manure.
11 They will stretch out their hands in it,
as swimmers stretch out their hands to swim.
God will bring down their pride

despite the cleverness[b] of their hands.
12 He will bring down your high fortified walls
and lay them low;
he will bring them down to the ground,
to the very dust." (Isaiah 26:10-12)
In that day His people will rise up and praise Him, for He is the God who makes the rough places level and smooth, the result of His care for the righteous:
"In that day this song will be sung in the land of Judah:
We have a strong city;
God makes salvation
its walls and ramparts.
2 Open the gates
that the righteous nation may enter,
the nation that keeps faith.
3 You will keep in perfect peace
those whose minds are steadfast,
because they trust in you.
4 Trust in the Lord forever,
for the Lord, the Lord himself, is the Rock eternal.
5 He humbles those who dwell on high,
he lays the lofty city low;
he levels it to the ground
and casts it down to the dust.
6 Feet trample it down—
the feet of the oppressed,
the footsteps of the poor.
7 The path of the righteous is level;
you, the Upright One, make the way of the righteous smooth." (Isaiah 27:1-7) We shall see more of this language later in Isaih (Isa. 40:4)- "Every valley shall be raised up, every mountain and hill made low; the rough ground shall become level, the rugged places a plain." (NIV)
There is the sure promise of resurrection of the dead:
"But your dead will live, Lord;
their bodies will rise—
let those who dwell in the dust
wake up and shout for joy—
your dew is like the dew of the morning;
the earth will give birth to her dead." (Isaiah 27:19)
The wicked and those who practice evil will be punished as God exercises His wrath upon those who have sinned:
"Go, my people, enter your rooms
and shut the doors behind you;
hide yourselves for a little while
until his wrath has passed by.
21 See, the Lord is coming out of his dwelling
to punish the people of the earth for their sins.
The earth will disclose the blood shed on it;
the earth will conceal its slain no longer." (Isaiah 27:20-21)

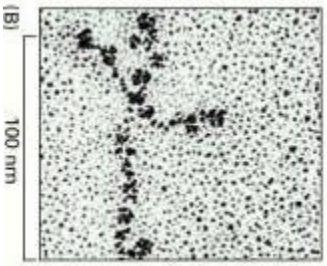
Ephesians 4

This chapter gives at least a partial answer to the question “How then shall we live?” (Ezekiel 33:10; Romans 6). The first answer is that we shall live- if living in a way that pleases God- with unity in the church. The capstone of this part of the letter reads like this*: “There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to one hope when you were called; 5 one Lord, one faith, one baptism; 6 one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.”* (Ephesians 4:4-6)

Then follows a rather puzzling (to me, at least) diversion into a statewment of belief that ha=s been incorporated in creedal statements: *“But to each one of us grace has been given as Christ apportioned it. 8 This is why it (or “God”) says:*
“When he ascended on high,
he took many captives
and gave gifts to his people.”
9 (What does “he ascended” mean except that he also descended to the lower, earthly regions? 10 He who descended is the very one who ascended higher than all the heavens, in order to fill the whole universe.) (Eph. 4:7-10)
The differences in the rendering of the Apostle’s Creed (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Apostles'_Creed) are centered around the phrase “descended into hell” which is found in most versions of the creed but not the United Methodist version. Logic would hold that an ascension would have to be from a lower place, but logic does not dictate that the lower place necessarily be “hell”.

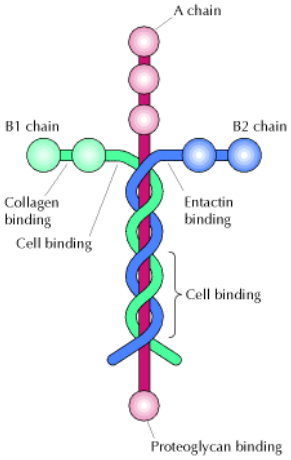
There is then a brief description of the giving of gifts to the members of the body of the Church, such they all might work together and accomplish kingdom work: *“So Christ himself gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers, 12 to equip his people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up 13 until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ. 14 Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of people in their deceitful scheming. 15 Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will grow to become in every respect the mature body of him who is the head, that is, Christ. 16 From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work.”* (Eph. 4:11-16) We no longer need to have an immature faith, but will- and should- mature in the faith until we have a more complete understanding of the nature of God and His Son.

One of the most powerful sermons I have ever heard (by the miracle of video on the Internet) ws a sermon delivered by Lou Giglio on this passage, especially verse 16- *“From Him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work”.* The sermon includes a conversation with Lou and a molecular biologist friend, a believer, that tells Lou how excited he is about “laminin”. The video is presented here for your reference (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZwUS2J0m1M0) . The climax of the story is a picture- an electrom micrograph of this remarkable protein- which literally holds everything in the body together. Here is a rendering of the micrograph:



http://timbernard.org/Laminin.htm

And here is a “functional drawing” of the same molecule:



https://answersingenesis.org/biology/microbiology/laminin-and-the-cross/

Seems like God is giving us a really strong hint as to what “holds everything together”!

The second answer to “How than shall we live?” is at leat partly described in the last section of this portion of the letter. The answer is- we should live lives that are different from the unbelievers around us, lives that are characterized by the fruits of the Spirit, especially love: *“So I tell you this, and insist on it in the Lord, that you must no longer live as the Gentiles do, in the futility of their thinking. 18 They are darkened in their understanding and separated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them due to the hardening of their hearts. 19 Having lost all sensitivity, they have given themselves over to sensuality so as to indulge in every kind of impurity, and they are full of greed. 20 That, however, is not the way of life you learned 21 when you heard about Christ and were taught in him in accordance with the truth that is in Jesus. 22 You were taught, with regard to your former way of life, to put off your old self, which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires; 23 to be made new in the attitude of your minds; 24 and to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness.”* (Eph. 4:17-24) We are to be the “new selves “ (verse 24), that have been created by the work of God’s Spirit in our lives (2 Cor. 5:17)

The walk of the Christian believer should be characterized by hopeful and helpful conversations, a positive spirit free of bitterness and anger, and full of true

compassion- forgiving both those within and outside of the fellowship: *“Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen. 30 And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. 31 Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice. 32 Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.”* (Eph. 4: 29-32) Impossible? For us, alone and without God’s Spirit and power? Yes! But with God- *“all things are possible”* (Matthew 19:26)

Isaiah 27-28 October 3, 2014 Ephesians 5

God will make the reality of his anger and correction clear to His people “in that day”, even slaying the fearsome Leviathan (see Job 41)! The people of God who are in a loving and obedient relationship with their God have nothing to fear- He is just and righteous and sees the hearts, minds and spirits of all His created beings clearly and without prejudice or favoritism- He is the only truly wise judge! The Scriptures describe it this way:

“In that day,
the Lord will punish with his sword—
his fierce, great and powerful sword—
Leviathan the gliding serpent,
Leviathan the coiling serpent;
he will slay the monster of the sea.
2 In that day—
“Sing about a fruitful vineyard:
3 I, the Lord, watch over it;
I water it continually.
I guard it day and night
so that no one may harm it.
4 I am not angry.
If only there were briers and thorns confronting me!
I would march against them in battle;
I would set them all on fire.
5 Or else let them come to me for refuge;
let them make peace with me,
yes, let them make peace with me.”
6 In days to come Jacob will take root,
Israel will bud and blossom
and fill all the world with fruit.” (Isaiah 27:1-6)

God will gather His people from the vast area into which they have been dispersed, and they will join together in worship of the One True God*: “In that day the Lord will thresh from the flowing Euphrates to the Wadi of Egypt, and you, Israel, will be gathered up one by one. 13 And in that day a great trumpet will sound. Those who were perishing in Assyria and those who were exiled in Egypt will come and worship the Lord on the holy mountain in Jerusalem.“* (Isaiah 27:12-13)

God will establish Himself as the true Leader of His people, displacing those who have led the people astray and have nor honored God in ways that were right and pleasing to Him:

“Woe to that wreath, the pride of Ephraim’s drunkards,
to the fading flower, his glorious beauty,
set on the head of a fertile valley—
to that city, the pride of those laid low by wine!
2 See, the Lord has one who is powerful and strong.
Like a hailstorm and a destructive wind,
like a driving rain and a flooding downpour,
he will throw it forcefully to the ground.
3 That wreath, the pride of Ephraim’s drunkards,
will be trampled underfoot.
4 That fading flower, his glorious beauty,
set on the head of a fertile valley,
will be like figs ripe before harvest—
as soon as people see them and take them in hand,
they swallow them.
5 In that day the Lord Almighty
will be a glorious crown,
a beautiful wreath
for the remnant of his people.
6 He will be a spirit of justice
to the one who sits in judgment,
a source of strength
to those who turn back the battle at the gate.” (Isaiah 28:1-6)

So far have these “leaders” staryed from their true calling that they are now incapacitated with alcohol. (God must have seen a few “bar scenes” as He captures the drunkenness and aftermath of drinking with brutal clarity!) The description of the state of these “leaders” is sickening:

“And these also stagger from wine
and reel from beer:
Priests and prophets stagger from beer
and are befuddled with wine;
they reel from beer,
they stagger when seeing visions,
they stumble when rendering decisions.
8 All the tables are covered with vomit
and there is not a spot without filth.
9 “Who is it he is trying to teach?
To whom is he explaining his message?
To children weaned from their milk,
to those just taken from the breast?
10 For it is:
Do this, do that,
a rule for this, a rule for that[c];
a little here, a little there.” (Isaiah 28:7-10)

Verse 10 is rendered another way according to the translator’s notes:

“Hebrew / sav lasav sav lasav / kav lakav kav lakav (probably meaningless sounds mimicking the prophet’s words)” The prophets have been reduced to “babbling”!

In stark contrast, the Word from the Lord is clear and sure, including what is certainly a Messianic prophesy about the “corner stone” (verse 16) God will lay down- a stone upon which one can build with confidence:
So this is what the Sovereign Lord says:
“See, I lay a stone in Zion, a tested stone,
a precious cornerstone for a sure foundation;
the one who relies on it
will never be stricken with panic.
17 I will make justice the measuring line
and righteousness the plumb line;
hail will sweep away your refuge, the lie,
and water will overflow your hiding place.
18 Your covenant with death will be annulled;
your agreement with the realm of the dead will not stand.
When the overwhelming scourge sweeps by,
you will be beaten down by it.
19 As often as it comes it will carry you away;
morning after morning, by day and by night,
it will sweep through.”
The understanding of this message
will bring sheer terror.
20 The bed is too short to stretch out on,
the blanket too narrow to wrap around you.
21 The Lord will rise up as he did at Mount Perazim,
he will rouse himself as in the Valley of Gibeon—
to do his work, his strange work,
and perform his task, his alien task.” (Isaiah 28:16-21)
One of my fondest memories of LeRoy Schroen- my ex father in law- was his love of Scriptures- especially the humor and sadness in verse 20- “the bed is too short, the blanket too narrow”. What a plight! If we “ball up” because the bed is short, then the blanket will not cover us. How tragically funny!

Just as there is a “right way” to plant and harvest crops, there is a “right way” for every activity under the sun- which God not only knows but “invented”! The prophet reminds us that God is the only true source of wisdom, understanding and knowledge. How blessed is the one who seeks His counsel in everything:
“Listen and hear my voice;
pay attention and hear what I say.
24 When a farmer plows for planting, does he plow continually?
Does he keep on breaking up and working the soil?
25 When he has leveled the surface,
does he not sow caraway and scatter cumin?
Does he not plant wheat in its place,[e]
barley in its plot,[f]
and spelt in its field?
26 His God instructs him
and teaches him the right way.

27 Caraway is not threshed with a sledge,
nor is the wheel of a cart rolled over cumin;
caraway is beaten out with a rod,
and cumin with a stick.
28 Grain must be ground to make bread;
so one does not go on threshing it forever.
The wheels of a threshing cart may be rolled over it,
but one does not use horses to grind grain.
29 All this also comes from the Lord Almighty,
whose plan is wonderful,
whose wisdom is magnificent." (Isaiah 28:23-29)

Ephesians 5

If there ever were a "Cliff Notes" version of the Bible, one of the sections of Scripture that would have to be included would be Matthew 22:36-40: *"Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?" 37 Jesus replied: "'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.'[a] 38 This is the first and greatest commandment. 39 And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.'[b] 40 All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments."*

Paul's reminder to the church in Ephesus is very similar to these words of Jesus: *"Follow God's example, therefore, as dearly loved children 2 and walk in the way of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God."* (Eph. 5:1-2) How do we walk in the "way of love"? We simply love God with all we are and have, and love each other as we would like to be loved ourselves. Against such love there "is no law" (Gal. 5:23).

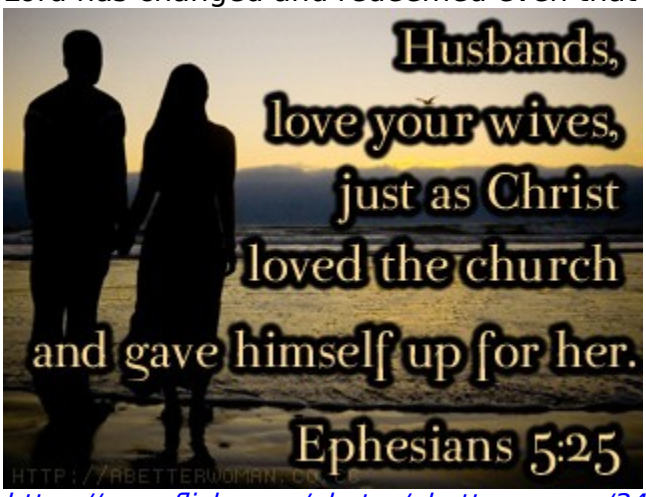
Paul warns against sexual immorality, not only because it is such a poor witness to the unbelieving world, but because of the enormous destructive power of sex "outside of bound and limits". There should not even be the appearance of impropriety*: "But among you there must not be even a hint of sexual immorality, or of any kind of impurity, or of greed, because these are improper for God's holy people. 4 Nor should there be obscenity, foolish talk or coarse joking, which are out of place, but rather thanksgiving. 5 For of this you can be sure: No immoral, impure or greedy person—such a person is an idolater—has any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and of God.[a] 6 Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of such things God's wrath comes on those who are disobedient. 7 Therefore do not be partners with them."* (Eph. 5:3-7). Much confusion has been improperly derived from statements like those in verse 5- "no immoral, impure, or greedy person…has any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and of God". Does this mean that all of us who have been "immoral, impure or greedy" are doomed to an everlasting Hell? Fortunately that is not the meaning here. Those who are in a lifestyle of unrepentant and deliberate immorality cannot inherit the Kingdom- but the wonderful news is that God "loves the sinner" and constantly draws us back into His wonderful presence. It is our own fault if we have chosen -over and over- to prefer sin and ignore God that we are out of fellowship- perhaps forever!

We we all once in darkness, but have now come into the light! We should live joyful and grateful lives for that great Love that has saved us- even from ourselves: *"For you were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Live as children of light 9 (for the fruit of the light consists in all goodness, righteousness and truth) 10 and find out what pleases the Lord. 11 Have nothing to do with the fruitless deeds of darkness, but rather expose them. 12 It is shameful even to mention what the disobedient do in secret. 13 But everything exposed by the light becomes visible—and everything that is illuminated becomes a light. 14 This is why it is said:*
"Wake up, sleeper,
rise from the dead,
and Christ will shine on you."
15 Be very careful, then, how you live—not as unwise but as wise, 16 making the most of every opportunity, because the days are evil. 17 Therefore do not be foolish, but understand what the Lord's will is." (Eph. 5:8-17)

One of the most powerful teachings I ever received is in this next passage of this letter- we are to be "filled with the Spirit"! When I attende Explo 72 in Dallas, TX, this was the theme of that Lay Institute for Evangelism (LIFE)- the wonderful workings and truths about God's Spirit. WE were taught how to "breathe spiritually"- to inhale the Spirit and exhale all that is displeasing to God. Then we got to put our teaching into practice as we literally covered Dallas with "door to door" evangelism, sharing God's wonderful message of salvation using the Four Laws booklet. It was a glorious day! The words in the letter to the Ephesaians are*: "Do not get drunk on wine, which leads to debauchery. Instead, be filled with the Spirit, 19 speaking to one another with psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit. Sing and make music from your heart to the Lord, 20 always giving thanks to God the Father for everything, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ."* (Eph. 5:18-20). This is certainly not a "suggestion"- we are told (in the imperative- as a command- BE filled with the Spirit!). What a difference in witness, power and peace it makes when we are filled versus "empty"!

Then there is a beautiful- and practicel- word on the life of those who are married- 1) first we are to submit "to each other"; 2) wives are to be "submissive" to husbands and 3) husbands are to LOVE their wives- as they love themselves! The problem with some interpretations of this passage revolve aroung point #1- we are to be submissive to each other. As a specific example, wives are to submit to their husbands, but they will do so if they are loved by their husbands "as the husband loves himself". There can, of course, be troubles if the husband does not love himself. This seems to be the case when a man does not love himself like he should- many cases of spousal abuse can be traced to this issue alone. If a man loves his wife "as himself" or to a higher standard "as Christ loves the church" then there will be no problems in that marriage. A husband who wishes to love his wife in that self sacrificial and caring way, will be rewarded with love in return! We are told: *"Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her 26 to make her holy, cleansing[b] her by the washing with water through the word, 27 and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless. 28 In this same way, husbands ought to love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself."* (Eph. 5:25-28)

Paul then tells us two things that are both very important. *"This is a profound mystery—but I am talking about Christ and the church. 33 However, each one of you also must love his wife as he loves himself, and the wife must respect her husband."* (Eph. 5:32-33) First, the union of two persons in marriage is likened to the "mystical" union of Christ and His church; second, that wives should "respect" their husbands. There is certainly beauty and mystery in both earthly marriage and the "marriage" between Christ and His bride, the church (Rev. 19:7-9; 21:1-2). No one could possibley plumb the depths of this mystery, but the joining of two persons or the union of Christ and the church are characterized by selfless, enduring love that always wishes the best and tries to achieve the best for the other party. The second point about wives "respecting" their husbands is also important. Sadly, one of the reasons my first marriage failed was that my wife did not "respect" me. I could probably spend the remaining years of my life exploring the "why" and "how" of that, but I can certainly spend my remaining years more profitably. Suffice it to say that she made it very clear that she no longer "respected" me when our marriage failed- if indeed she ever did. The story is a tragic one, but the love of the Lord has changed and redeemed even that dark period in my walk!



https://www.flickr.com/photos/abetterwoman/3445912733/

Isaiah 29-30 October 4, 2014 Ephesians 6

Why? Why do terrible things happen to God's people? It doesn't seem "fair" or "right"- and yet we know that these things happen. Isaiah prophesied that horrible things would happen to God's own people, in the land that he had promised them in a covenant with Abram/Abraham:

"Woe to you, Ariel, Ariel,
the city where David settled!
Add year to year
and let your cycle of festivals go on.
2 Yet I will besiege Ariel;
she will mourn and lament,
she will be to me like an altar hearth.[a]
3 I will encamp against you on all sides;
I will encircle you with towers
and set up my siege works against you.

4 Brought low, you will speak from the ground;
your speech will mumble out of the dust.
Your voice will come ghostlike from the earth;
out of the dust your speech will whisper." (Isaiah 29:1-4)

Later in this chapter we see at least some of the "reason why"- it is because the people have not truly loved God, have not truly worshipped Him, but have substituted a man made "religion" for a life of pure devotion and authentic spirituality:
"The Lord says:
"These people come near to me with their mouth
and honor me with their lips,
but their hearts are far from me.
Their worship of me
is based on merely human rules they have been taught.[b]
14 Therefore once more I will astound these people
with wonder upon wonder;
the wisdom of the wise will perish,
the intelligence of the intelligent will vanish."
15 Woe to those who go to great depths
to hide their plans from the Lord,
who do their work in darkness and think,
"Who sees us? Who will know?"
16 You turn things upside down,
as if the potter were thought to be like the clay!
Shall what is formed say to the one who formed it,
"You did not make me"?
Can the pot say to the potter,
"You know nothing"?" (Isaiah 29:13-16)
There we have it! The prople "worship God" with their words but niot their hearts- they are self centerd, self seeking and self-gratifying and are arrogant enough to question the "potter"- the Lord Himself as to His ability and capability to be "in charge". How far they had fallen from the faith of Abram, which God "credited it to him as righteousness" (Gen. 15:6).

Despite their unfaithfulness, God never gave up on His childfren- and He never gives up on us. He stands ready to redeem- to "buy back" His children:
Therefore this is what the Lord, who redeemed Abraham, says to the descendants of Jacob:
"No longer will Jacob be ashamed;
no longer will their faces grow pale.
23 When they see among them their children,
the work of my hands,
they will keep my name holy;
they will acknowledge the holiness of the Holy One of Jacob,
and will stand in awe of the God of Israel.
24 Those who are wayward in spirit will gain understanding;
those who complain will accept instruction." (Isaiah 29:22-24)

But “woe” to those who follow their own designs, who seek out Egypt for protection and strength instead of the Lord, who is “mighty in battle” (Psalm 24:8):

“Woe to the obstinate children,”
declares the Lord,
“to those who carry out plans that are not mine,
forming an alliance, but not by my Spirit,
heaping sin upon sin;
2 who go down to Egypt
without consulting me;
who look for help to Pharaoh’s protection,
to Egypt’s shade for refuge.
3 But Pharaoh’s protection will be to your shame,
Egypt’s shade will bring you disgrace.
4 Though they have officials in Zoan
and their envoys have arrived in Hanes,
5 everyone will be put to shame
because of a people useless to them,
who bring neither help nor advantage,
but only shame and disgrace.” (Isaiah 30:1-5)

The consequences of rebellion are truly awful, but are fitting with the rejection of God by His own people, who ignored and dishonored the very God who led them out of the wilderness into a Land of Promise:

“Go now, write it on a tablet for them,
inscribe it on a scroll,
that for the days to come
it may be an everlasting witness.
9 For these are rebellious people, deceitful children,
children unwilling to listen to the Lord’s instruction.
10 They say to the seers,
“See no more visions!”
and to the prophets,
“Give us no more visions of what is right!
Tell us pleasant things,
prophesy illusions.
11 Leave this way,
get off this path,
and stop confronting us
with the Holy One of Israel!”
12 Therefore this is what the Holy One of Israel says:

“Because you have rejected this message,
relied on oppression
and depended on deceit,
13 this sin will become for you
like a high wall, cracked and bulging,
that collapses suddenly, in an instant.
14 It will break in pieces like pottery,

shattered so mercilessly
that among its pieces not a fragment will be found
for taking coals from a hearth
or scooping water out of a cistern." (Isaiah 30:8-14)
Yet God is constantly offeing a "way out" for His people- he loves them and wants to reclaim them for fellowship with Him:
"This is what the Sovereign Lord, the Holy One of Israel, says:
"In repentance and rest is your salvation,
in quietness and trust is your strength,
but you would have none of it.
16 You said, 'No, we will flee on horses.'
Therefore you will flee!
You said, 'We will ride off on swift horses.'
Therefore your pursuers will be swift!
17 A thousand will flee
at the threat of one;
at the threat of five
you will all flee away,
till you are left
like a flagstaff on a mountaintop,
like a banner on a hill."
18 Yet the Lord longs to be gracious to you;
therefore he will rise up to show you compassion.
For the Lord is a God of justice.
Blessed are all who wait for him!" (Isaiah 30:15-18)

The choice is ours- turn to the Lord and live and be blessed, or turn away from Him and find the woes of those who are without their Father and mighty King. God is always seeking to restore, to bless, to reconcile and to heal: *"People of Zion, who live in Jerusalem, you will weep no more. How gracious he will be when you cry for help! As soon as he hears, he will answer you. 20 Although the Lord gives you the bread of adversity and the water of affliction, your teachers will be hidden no more; with your own eyes you will see them. 21 Whether you turn to the right or to the left, your ears will hear a voice behind you, saying, "This is the way; walk in it." 22 Then you will desecrate your idols overlaid with silver and your images covered with gold; you will throw them away like a menstrual cloth and say to them, "Away with you!"23 He will also send you rain for the seed you sow in the ground, and the food that comes from the land will be rich and plentiful. In that day your cattle will graze in broad meadows. 24 The oxen and donkeys that work the soil will eat fodder and mash, spread out with fork and shovel. 25 In the day of great slaughter, when the towers fall, streams of water will flow on every high mountain and every lofty hill. 26 The moon will shine like the sun, and the sunlight will be seven times brighter, like the light of seven full days, when the Lord binds up the bruises of his people and heals the wounds he inflicted."* (Isaiah 30:19-26)

The mighty arm of the Lord will bring destruction on the enemies of the prople, and the faithful will see once more the power and majesty and justice of the Lord:
"And you will sing
as on the night you celebrate a holy festival;
your hearts will rejoice

as when people playing pipes go up
to the mountain of the Lord,
to the Rock of Israel.
30 The Lord will cause people to hear his majestic voice
and will make them see his arm coming down
with raging anger and consuming fire,
with cloudburst, thunderstorm and hail.
31 The voice of the Lord will shatter Assyria;
with his rod he will strike them down.
32 Every stroke the Lord lays on them
with his punishing club
will be to the music of timbrels and harps,
as he fights them in battle with the blows of his arm." (Isaiah 30:29-32)

Ephesians 6

In this day of controversy and turmoil, the right of parents to discipline their children in a loving but firm way is at risk. Someone witnessing (or even hearing about) a child being "spanked" or disciplined in any physical way is risking facing charges of "child abuse". Please be clear, I am not advocating actual child abuse- locking children in basements, depriving them of food or water, or beating them to the point of deep bruises is not in keeping with my beliefs (I guess we can have debates at this point about Leviticus 20:9 and similar verses- please see http://www.gotquestions.org/stone-rebellious-children.html for a balanced and Scriptural discussion of this topic).

Ephesians 6 says simply *"Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right. 2 "Honor your father and mother"—which is the first commandment with a promise— 3 "so that it may go well with you and that you may enjoy long life on the earth."* (Eph. 6:1-3). This verse is also followed immediately by a counterbalancing verse: *"Fathers, do not exasperate your children; instead, bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord."* (Eph 6:4). If both these verses are in balance, then parents will discipline as God does- out of love and to correct harmful behavior- and they will do their correction "in the Lord" (Eph. 6:1)

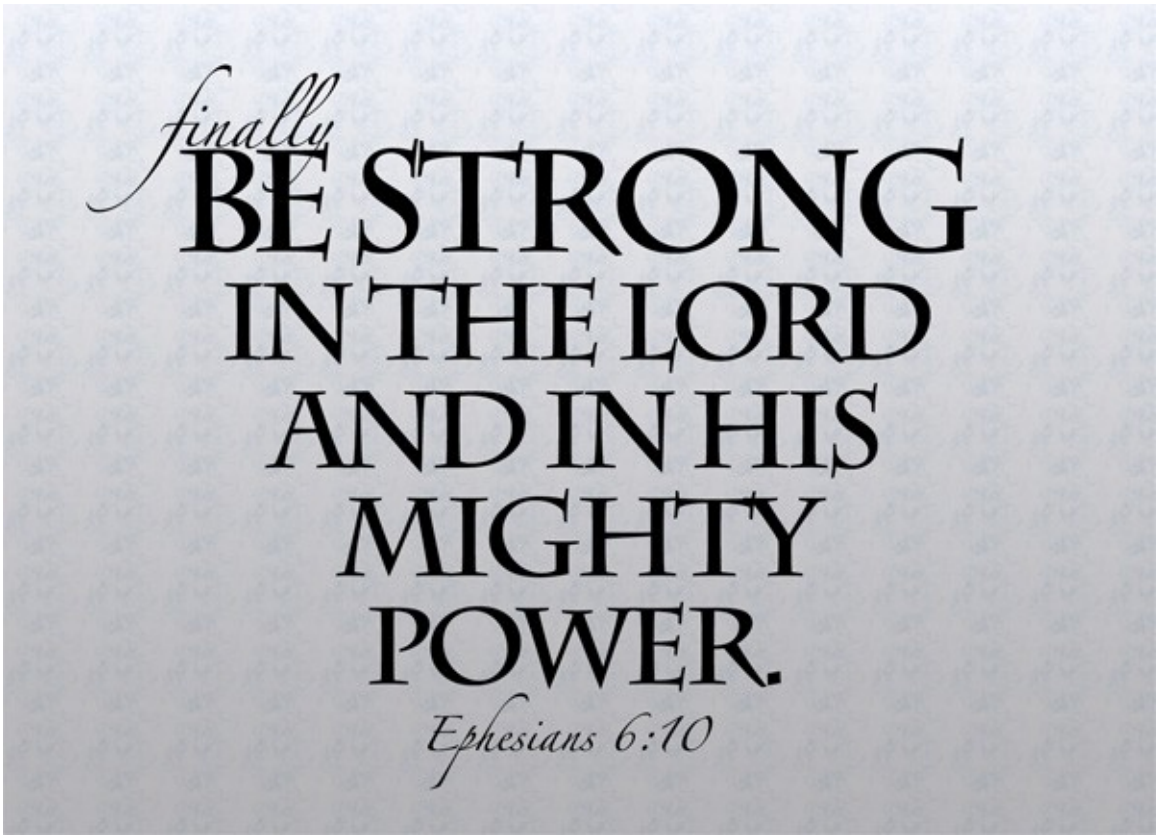
Then we encounter a truly "sticky" issue- the issue of slavery. In the times of both the Old and New Testaments, slavery was an accepted part of society. As recently as 150 years ago, there was slavery in these United States. The Bible does not specifically condemn slavery, but does point to the example of Onesimus in the book of Philemon as a plea for a former slave to be treated as a "brother in the Lord" (Philemon 1:16). Please see the excellent article (http://www.gotquestions.org/Bible-slavery.html). The Scripture says: *"Slaves, obey your earthly masters with respect and fear, and with sincerity of heart, just as you would obey Christ. 6 Obey them not only to win their favor when their eye is on you, but as slaves of Christ, doing the will of God from your heart. 7 Serve wholeheartedly, as if you were serving the Lord, not people, 8 because you know that the Lord will reward each one for whatever good they do, whether they are slave or free. 9 And masters, treat your slaves in the same way. Do not threaten them, since you know that he who is both their Master and yours is in heaven, and there is no favoritism with him."* (Eph. 6:5-9) Perhaps the best I can offer is that

there will be equality in heaven, since God is no “respecter of persons” (Acts 10:34 KJV).

We live in a world hostile to God, so Paul’s order to us is to “buckle up”- put on the FULL armor of God. We will all need it for the inevitable struggles ahead! Note the pieces of armor and their function- and also notice that the “back” of the armor is missing- we are to meet the Enemy “head on”- and never turn and run in fear:
“Finally, be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power. 11 Put on the full armor of God, so that you can take your stand against the devil’s schemes. 12 For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms. 13 Therefore put on the full armor of God, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground, and after you have done everything, to stand. 14 Stand firm then, with the belt of truth buckled around your waist, with the breastplate of righteousness in place, 15 and with your feet fitted with the readiness that comes from the gospel of peace. 16 In addition to all this, take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one. 17 Take the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.” (Eph. 6:10-17)

Not only are we to “armor up” but pray- pray “in the Spirit” as God’s own Spirit leads us- and pray for each other. One of the Christain’s great and powerful tools for righteousness is the power of intercessory prayer! We have seen miracle after miracle occur when God acts in answer to the prayers of our “warriors” who pray each week in our church. What a blessing!
“And pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the Lord’s people.” (Eph. 6:18).

Like the wonderful and caring pastor that he was, Paul closes the letter with final farewells and greetings to those he has loved and served with in this church- and like God- he calls one of them “by name” (1 Sam. 3:8; Isa. 43:1; John 10:3; 14-15):
“Tychicus, the dear brother and faithful servant in the Lord, will tell you everything, so that you also may know how I am and what I am doing. 22 I am sending him to you for this very purpose, that you may know how we are, and that he may encourage you. 23 Peace to the brothers and sisters, and love with faith from God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. 24 Grace to all who love our Lord Jesus Christ with an undying love.”(Eph. 6:21-24)



http://reversingverses.com/2013/04/23/ephesians-610/

Isaiah 31-33 October 5, 2014 Philippians 1

Once again, God warns those who would rely on Egypt for strength and deliverance. The only reliable protector and defender is the Lord Himself:
"Woe to those who go down to Egypt for help,
who rely on horses,
who trust in the multitude of their chariots
and in the great strength of their horsemen,
but do not look to the Holy One of Israel,
or seek help from the Lord.
Yet he too is wise and can bring disaster;
he does not take back his words.
He will rise up against that wicked nation,
against those who help evildoers.
But the Egyptians are mere mortals and not God;
their horses are flesh and not spirit.
When the Lord stretches out his hand,
those who help will stumble,
those who are helped will fall;
all will perish together." (Isaiah 31:1-3)
God beckons His people to return to His care, guidance and protection:
"Return, you Israelites, to the One you have so greatly revolted against. 7 For in that day every one of you will reject the idols of silver and gold your sinful hands have made.

“Assyria will fall by no human sword;
a sword, not of mortals, will devour them.
They will flee before the sword
and their young men will be put to forced labor.
Their stronghold will fall because of terror;
at the sight of the battle standard their commanders will panic,”
declares the Lord,
whose fire is in Zion,
whose furnace is in Jerusalem.” (Isaiah 31:7-9)

God then reveals a plan for righteousness in the land, with righteous rulers. There is at least a hint of a Messianic prophecy here, especially in verse 1- a “king” will reign in righteousness:

“See, a king will reign in righteousness
and rulers will rule with justice.
Each one will be like a shelter from the wind
and a refuge from the storm,
like streams of water in the desert
and the shadow of a great rock in a thirsty land.
Then the eyes of those who see will no longer be closed,
and the ears of those who hear will listen.
The fearful heart will know and understand,
and the stammering tongue will be fluent and clear.
No longer will the fool be called noble
nor the scoundrel be highly respected.
For fools speak folly,
their hearts are bent on evil:
They practice ungodliness
and spread error concerning the LORD;
the hungry they leave empty
and from the thirsty they withhold water.
Scoundrels use wicked methods,
they make up evil schemes
to destroy the poor with lies,
even when the plea of the needy is just.
But the noble make noble plans,
and by noble deeds they stand.” (Isaiah 31:1-8)
The greatest King- the King of Kings, will indeed “reign in righteousness” and inhabit the throne of David forever (Luke 1:32).

Isaiah targets the women of Judah, whose complacency mirrors the complacent and uncaring attitude of so many toward God their Creator and Shield. God promises that there will be an unpleasant awakening for these who have forgotten Him:
“You women who are so complacent,
rise up and listen to me;
you daughters who feel secure,

hear what I have to say!
In little more than a year
you who feel secure will tremble;
the grape harvest will fail,
and the harvest of fruit will not come.
Tremble, you complacent women;
shudder, you daughters who feel secure!
Strip off your fine clothes
and wrap yourselves in rags.
Beat your breasts for the pleasant fields,
for the fruitful vines
and for the land of my people,
a land overgrown with thorns and briers—
yes, mourn for all houses of merriment
and for this city of revelry." (Isaiah 31:9-13)

There is, however, always the promise of restoration, when God sets things right and establishes His people on the path that leads to prosperity and true peace:

"The fortress will be abandoned,
the noisy city deserted;
citadel and watchtower will become a wasteland forever,
the delight of donkeys, a pasture for flocks,
till the Spirit is poured on us from on high,
and the desert becomes a fertile field,
and the fertile field seems like a forest.
The Lord's justice will dwell in the desert,
his righteousness live in the fertile field.
The fruit of that righteousness will be peace;
its effect will be quietness and confidence forever.
My people will live in peaceful dwelling places,
in secure homes,
in undisturbed places of rest.
Though hail flattens the forest
and the city is leveled completely,
how blessed you will be,
sowing your seed by every stream,
and letting your cattle and donkeys range free." (Isaiah 31:14-20)

When God's people "discover again" the source of their strength, deliverance and protection, then there will be joy and gladness- the real "treasure"- in the land that God has promised them:

"The Lord is exalted, for he dwells on high;
he will fill Zion with his justice and righteousness.
He will be the sure foundation for your times,
a rich store of salvation and wisdom and knowledge;
the fear of the Lord is the key to this treasure." (Isaiah 32:5-6)

God promises to set His city and His people as an example to the nations of the peace, prosperity and true goodness that comes from complete trust, faith and reliance on Him:

"Look on Zion, the city of our festivals;
your eyes will see Jerusalem,

a peaceful abode, a tent that will not be moved;
its stakes will never be pulled up,
nor any of its ropes broken.
There the Lord will be our Mighty One.
It will be like a place of broad rivers and streams.
No galley with oars will ride them,
no mighty ship will sail them.
For the Lord is our judge,
the Lord is our lawgiver,
the Lord is our king;
it is he who will save us." (Isaiah 33:20-22).

Philippians 1

Philippians, like so many of the letters in the New Testament, is a pastoral letter from Paul to a specific church or group of churches. This letter is to the church in Phillipi. According to Bible gateway, Phillip was "one of the leading cities in the district of Macedonia. Placed strategically on the Egnatian Way, Philippi enjoyed important privileges within the Roman empire: autonomous government and immunity from tribute." (https://www.biblegateway.com/blog/2012/08/letters-to-the-church-philippians/)

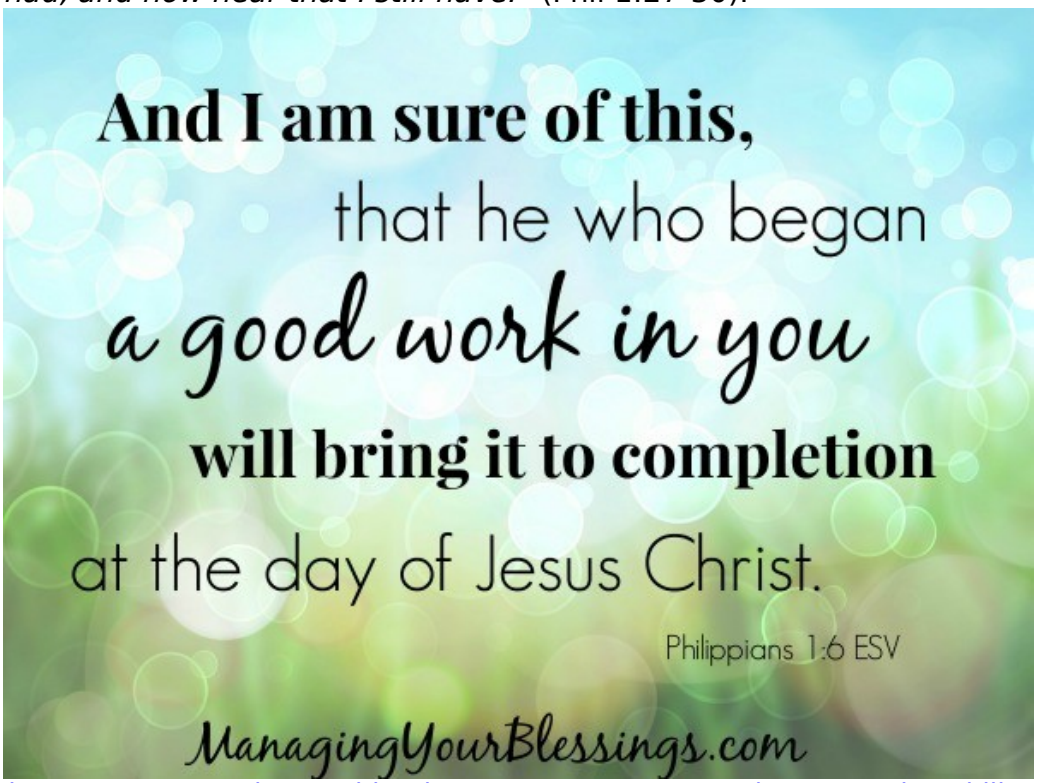
In this pastoral letter, Paul explores the themes of "suffering" and "joy", which are, from our experience at least, not entirely unrelated. Paul starts the letter in his usual way, with greetings to the church and thanks for their faithfulness: *"Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus, To all God's holy people in Christ Jesus at Philippi, together with the overseers and deacons: Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. I thank my God every time I remember you. In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now, being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus."* (Phil 1:1-6).

Several things are worthy of note in this brief passage: 1) in verse 1 we see that Paul and Timothy were working together as a team. This was typical of Paul's work. Although we tend to focus on Paul alone, he typically worked with a "co-laborer" or with a group of workers who assisted Paul in a variety of mission related activities; 2) Paul prayed constantly for this church "with joy"; and 3) Paul believed that God was continuing to work with His people, carrying the "good work" to completion (verse 6). This is a promise that so many believers have claimed- that God starts "good works" in us, and shepherds them (and us!) through to the end, increasing His influence and fruits in us as we learn to yield to His leadership and direction.

The apostle then prays powerfully that their "love may abound"- that it will grow and bear much beautiful and useful fruit: *"And this is my prayer: that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight, so that you may be able to discern what is best and may be pure and blameless for the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ—to the glory and praise of God."* (Phil. 1:9-11)

Here we see the confluence of “suffering” and “joy”. Paul is in chains and clearly suffering, yet he is joyful that the Gospel is advancing despite his imprisonment and distance from them: *“Now I want you to know, brothers and sisters, that what has happened to me has actually served to advance the gospel. As a result, it has become clear throughout the whole palace guard and to everyone else that I am in chains for Christ. And because of my chains, most of the brothers and sisters have become confident in the Lord and dare all the more to proclaim the gospel without fear.”* (Phil. 1:12-14).

Paul then assures them that whatever happens, they should continue to live a life “worthy of the Gospel”. I am reminded of the promise I made to do just that when my three children were baptized into the church. This is a weighty promise, and one that I kept only incompletely. Yet God has been able to take my “little” and my “halfhearted obedience” and mold my children into maturing believers- a testimony to His miraculous power. They turned out to be delights to Him and to me despite my parenting and because of His wonderful grace, love and care for them. I thank Him for that every day. Paul reminds the church in Phillipi that they should live this way also: *“Whatever happens, conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ. Then, whether I come and see you or only hear about you in my absence, I will know that you stand firm in the one Spirit, striving together as one for the faith of the gospel without being frightened in any way by those who oppose you. This is a sign to them that they will be destroyed, but that you will be saved—and that by God. For it has been granted to you on behalf of Christ not only to believe in him, but also to suffer for him, since you are going through the same struggle you saw I had, and now hear that I still have.”* (Phil 1:27-30).



http://www.managingyourblessings.com/2014/01/19/scripture-sunday-philippians-16/

Isaiah 34-36 October 6, 2014 Philippians 2

Isaiah 34 and 35 are poetic prophecies against the “nations (34) and a vision of God’s restored prople and land (35). The style of the Scripture changes drastically in Isaiah 36, where a prose format is used to describe the historical siege of God’s people by the Assyrians. This transition suggests that this book was written in sevral disctinct sections, perhaps separated by years from each other, before the whole book was complied. (Please see http://www.enduringword.com/commentaries/2336.htm) “This begins a four-chapter section different than the prophecies recorded before or after. Isaiah 36 and 37 describe the LORD’s work against the Assyrian threat. Isaiah 38 and 39 describe the response to the Babylonian threat. “This is history at its best, not dull recital of statistics and dates but an account which enables us to sense the haughty arrogance of the Assyrian and the chilling clutch of despair at the hearts of the Israelites.” (Cundall, cited in Grogan)”.

Isaiah 34 begins with a series of dire prophecies against the “nations of the world”. It describes in sometimes graphic detail the destruction of these nations and their people from the righteous wrath of God:

“Come near, you nations, and listen;
pay attention, you peoples!
Let the earth hear, and all that is in it,
the world, and all that comes out of it!
2 The Lord is angry with all nations;
his wrath is on all their armies.
He will totally destroy[a] them,
he will give them over to slaughter.
3 Their slain will be thrown out,
their dead bodies will stink;
the mountains will be soaked with their blood.
4 All the stars in the sky will be dissolved
and the heavens rolled up like a scroll;
all the starry host will fall
like withered leaves from the vine,
like shriveled figs from the fig tree.
5 My sword has drunk its fill in the heavens;
see, it descends in judgment on Edom,
the people I have totally destroyed.
6 The sword of the Lord is bathed in blood,
it is covered with fat—
the blood of lambs and goats,
fat from the kidneys of rams.
For the Lord has a sacrifice in Bozrah
and a great slaughter in the land of Edom.

7 And the wild oxen will fall with them,
the bull calves and the great bulls.
Their land will be drenched with blood,
and the dust will be soaked with fat.
8 For the Lord has a day of vengeance,
a year of retribution, to uphold Zion’s cause.
9 Edom’s streams will be turned into pitch,
her dust into burning sulfur;
her land will become blazing pitch!
10 It will not be quenched night or day;
its smoke will rise forever.
From generation to generation it will lie desolate;
no one will ever pass through it again.
11 The desert owl[b] and screech owl[c] will possess it;
the great owl[d] and the raven will nest there.
God will stretch out over Edom
the measuring line of chaos
and the plumb line of desolation.” (Isaiah 34:1-11)

The “plumb line” cited here in verse 11 is similar in function to the one described in Amos 7:8. God is showing us how far from His expectations and desrires we are, and how far we need to come to correct our attitudes and actions to be in compliance with His perfect will for us.

Contrast this passage with the joy of the righteous, who will walk on the “highway” (Isaiah 35:8):

“The desert and the parched land will be glad;
the wilderness will rejoice and blossom.
Like the crocus, 2 it will burst into bloom;
it will rejoice greatly and shout for joy.
The glory of Lebanon will be given to it,
the splendor of Carmel and Sharon;
they will see the glory of the Lord,
the splendor of our God.
3 Strengthen the feeble hands,
steady the knees that give way;
4 say to those with fearful hearts,
“Be strong, do not fear;
your God will come,
he will come with vengeance;
with divine retribution
he will come to save you.”
5 Then will the eyes of the blind be opened
and the ears of the deaf unstopped.
6 Then will the lame leap like a deer,
and the mute tongue shout for joy.
Water will gush forth in the wilderness
and streams in the desert.
7 The burning sand will become a pool,

the thirsty ground bubbling springs.
In the haunts where jackals once lay,
grass and reeds and papyrus will grow.
8 And a highway will be there;
it will be called the Way of Holiness;
it will be for those who walk on that Way.
The unclean will not journey on it;
wicked fools will not go about on it.
9 No lion will be there,
nor any ravenous beast;
they will not be found there.
But only the redeemed will walk there,
10 and those the Lord has rescued will return.
They will enter Zion with singing;
everlasting joy will crown their heads.
Gladness and joy will overtake them,
and sorrow and sighing will flee away." (Isaiah 35:1-10)
Thes righteous will have "everlasting joy" and the "eyes of the blind will be opened"!

The Scripture then "changes gears" to prose, and we find a historic description in an interlude between poetic prophecy. The situation for Israel is grim- the King of Assyria has conquer3ed all he has lifted his hand against, and his envoy speaks with the representative of King Hezekiah of Judah. Sennacherib- king of Assyria- had already captured "all the fortified cities of Judah" (Isaiah 36:1) and now was preparing to take Jerusalem. The arrogant and confident king proceeds to send word to the people in Jerusalem that he is a conquerer who will stop at nothing to achieve his military objectives. Hexekiah had given strict instructions to his people- "Do not answer them" (Isaiah 36:21). Hezekiah believed that the Lord would deliver them.
"In the fourteenth year of King Hezekiah's reign, Sennacherib king of Assyria attacked all the fortified cities of Judah and captured them. 2 Then the king of Assyria sent his field commander with a large army from Lachish to King Hezekiah at Jerusalem. When the commander stopped at the aqueduct of the Upper Pool, on the road to the Launderer's Field, 3 Eliakim son of Hilkiah the palace administrator, Shebna the secretary, and Joah son of Asaph the recorder went out to him. The field commander said to them, "Tell Hezekiah: "This is what the great king, the king of Assyria, says: On what are you basing this confidence of yours? You say you have counsel and might for war—but you speak only empty words. On whom are you depending, that you rebel against me? 6 Look, I know you are depending on Egypt, that splintered reed of a staff, which pierces the hand of anyone who leans on it! Such is Pharaoh king of Egypt to all who depend on him. 7 But if you say to me, "We are depending on the Lord our God"—isn't he the one whose high places and altars Hezekiah removed, saying to Judah and Jerusalem, "You must worship before this altar"? "'Come now, make a bargain with my master, the king of Assyria: I will give you two thousand horses—if you can put riders on them! 9 How then can you repulse one officer of the least of my master's officials, even though you are depending on Egypt for chariots and horsemen[e]? 10 Furthermore, have I come to attack and destroy this land without the Lord? The Lord himself told me to march against this country and destroy it.'" Then Eliakim, Shebna and Joah said to the

field commander, “Please speak to your servants in Aramaic, since we understand it. Don’t speak to us in Hebrew in the hearing of the people on the wall.” But the commander replied, “Was it only to your master and you that my master sent me to say these things, and not to the people sitting on the wall—who, like you, will have to eat their own excrement and drink their own urine?” Then the commander stood and called out in Hebrew, “Hear the words of the great king, the king of Assyria! 14 This is what the king says: Do not let Hezekiah deceive you. He cannot deliver you! 15 Do not let Hezekiah persuade you to trust in the Lord when he says, ‘The Lord will surely deliver us; this city will not be given into the hand of the king of Assyria.’ “Do not listen to Hezekiah. This is what the king of Assyria says: Make peace with me and come out to me. Then each of you will eat fruit from your own vine and fig tree and drink water from your own cistern, 17 until I come and take you to a land like your own—a land of grain and new wine, a land of bread and vineyards. “Do not let Hezekiah mislead you when he says, ‘The Lord will deliver us.’ Have the gods of any nations ever delivered their lands from the hand of the king of Assyria? 19 Where are the gods of Hamath and Arpad? Where are the gods of Sepharvaim? Have they rescued Samaria from my hand? 20 Who of all the gods of these countries have been able to save their lands from me? How then can the Lord deliver Jerusalem from my hand?” (Isaiah 36:1-20)

Philippians 2

At the Name of Jesus, every knee will bow and every tongue confess that he is Lord! This means everyone- the atheist, the feminist, the socialist, communist, radical Islamist- everyone!! The reality of the Kingship and Lordship of Jesus will be a great and mighty breakthrough event as everone will clearly see Him in all His holiness and glory. What a day that will be- what sorrow from those who have ignored, neglected or even mocked Him. Paul tells of this event in a poem/song embedded into this portion of his letter. Some feel it was a poem/song used in worship in the early church, but there is still much scholarly discussion about this passage (https://www.biblegateway.com/resources/commentaries/IVP-NT/Phil/Example-Christ). Whatever its origin or original use, this is a supreme distillation of the essence of the sacrifice of Christ, which is held up here as a model for all of us:

“In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus:
6 Who, being in very nature God,
did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage;
7 rather, he made himself nothing
by taking the very nature[b] of a servant,
being made in human likeness.
8 And being found in appearance as a man,
he humbled himself
by becoming obedient to death—
even death on a cross!
9 Therefore God exalted him to the highest place
and gave him the name that is above every name,
10 that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow,
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,
11 and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father.” (Phil. 2:5-11)

Sometimes I am reminded of how personal the Scripture's message can be. The next section of the letter to the Philippians is a perfect example. Lately I have been complaining and exhibiting a very negative attitude towards the "work of the Lord", especially as it relates to my local church. I typically DO the "right thing" but my attitude is resentful and I complain about wht I am required to do out of "Christain duty". I am certain God is not honored by this: *"Do everything without grumbling or arguing, 15 so that you may become blameless and pure, "children of God without fault in a warped and crooked generation."[c] Then you will shine among them like stars in the sky 16 as you hold firmly to the word of life. And then I will be able to boast on the day of Christ that I did not run or labor in vain."* (Phil. 2:14-16). So there it is- Paul has just told me I need to change my attitude and quit grumbling. I will ask Him for the power and the will to do this often- even today!

Paul, always pastoral, then writes that he will send Timothy to the church to take care of their needs. Timothy is commended here as one who cares for others and not his needs only: *"I hope in the Lord Jesus to send Timothy to you soon, that I also may be cheered when I receive news about you. 20 I have no one else like him, who will show genuine concern for your welfare. 21 For everyone looks out for their own interests, not those of Jesus Christ. 22 But you know that Timothy has proved himself, because as a son with his father he has served with me in the work of the gospel. 23 I hope, therefore, to send him as soon as I see how things go with me. 24 And I am confident in the Lord that I myself will come soon."* (Phil 2:19-24) And Paul will also send Epaphrodus to them as well: *"But I think it is necessary to send back to you Epaphroditus, my brother, co-worker and fellow soldier, who is also your messenger, whom you sent to take care of my needs. 26 For he longs for all of you and is distressed because you heard he was ill. 27 Indeed he was ill, and almost died. But God had mercy on him, and not on him only but also on me, to spare me sorrow upon sorrow. 28 Therefore I am all the more eager to send him, so that when you see him again you may be glad and I may have less anxiety. 29 So then, welcome him in the Lord with great joy, and honor people like him, 30 because he almost died for the work of Christ. He risked his life to make up for the help you yourselves could not give me."* (Phil. 2:25-30).

Isaiah 37-38 October 7, 2013 Philippians 3

How could a superior army be defeated without even one solder committed in battle to oppose them? The answer is simple- it was a miracle that God provided to deliver His pople and demonstrate the final result of arrogance against the Lord. Sennacherib's defiance of God had two major negative result- 1) the desctruction of most of his fielded army; and 2) his own death- ironically assassination by his own sons. God gave Isaiah this message*: "When King Hezekiah heard this, he tore his clothes and put on sackcloth and went into the temple of the Lord. 2 He sent Eliakim the palace administrator, Shebna the secretary, and the leading priests, all wearing sackcloth, to the prophet Isaiah son of Amoz. 3 They told him, "This is what Hezekiah says: This day is a day of distress and rebuke and disgrace, as when children come to the moment of birth and there is no strength to deliver them. 4 It may be that the Lord your God will hear the words of the field commander, whom his master, the king of Assyria, has sent to ridicule the living God, and that he will rebuke him for the words the Lord your God has heard. Therefore pray for the remnant that still survives." 5 When King Hezekiah's officials came to Isaiah, 6*

Isaiah said to them, “Tell your master, ‘This is what the Lord says: Do not be afraid of what you have heard—those words with which the underlings of the king of Assyria have blasphemed me. 7 Listen! When he hears a certain report, I will make him want to return to his own country, and there I will have him cut down with the sword.’” (Isaiah 37:1-7)

And Isaiah’s prophesy came to pass, exactly as God had revealed it to him: *Then Isaiah son of Amoz sent a message to Hezekiah: “This is what the Lord, the God of Israel, says: Because you have prayed to me concerning Sennacherib king of Assyria, 22 this is the word the Lord has spoken against him:*

“Virgin Daughter Zion
despises and mocks you.
Daughter Jerusalem
tosses her head as you flee.
23 Who is it you have ridiculed and blasphemed?
Against whom have you raised your voice
and lifted your eyes in pride?
Against the Holy One of Israel!
24 By your messengers
you have ridiculed the Lord.
And you have said,
‘With my many chariots
I have ascended the heights of the mountains,
the utmost heights of Lebanon.
I have cut down its tallest cedars,
the choicest of its junipers.
I have reached its remotest heights,
the finest of its forests.
25 I have dug wells in foreign lands[c]
and drunk the water there.
With the soles of my feet
I have dried up all the streams of Egypt.’
26 “Have you not heard?
Long ago I ordained it.
In days of old I planned it;
now I have brought it to pass,
that you have turned fortified cities
into piles of stone.
27 Their people, drained of power,
are dismayed and put to shame.
They are like plants in the field,
like tender green shoots,
like grass sprouting on the roof,
scorched[d] before it grows up.
28 “But I know where you are
and when you come and go
and how you rage against me.
29 Because you rage against me
and because your insolence has reached my ears,

I will put my hook in your nose
and my bit in your mouth,
and I will make you return
by the way you came.
30 “This will be the sign for you, Hezekiah:

“This year you will eat what grows by itself,
and the second year what springs from that.
But in the third year sow and reap,
plant vineyards and eat their fruit.
31 Once more a remnant of the kingdom of Judah
will take root below and bear fruit above.
32 For out of Jerusalem will come a remnant,
and out of Mount Zion a band of survivors.
The zeal of the Lord Almighty
will accomplish this.
33 “Therefore this is what the Lord says concerning the king of Assyria:

“He will not enter this city
or shoot an arrow here.
He will not come before it with shield
or build a siege ramp against it.
34 By the way that he came he will return;
he will not enter this city,”
declares the Lord.
35 “I will defend this city and save it,
for my sake and for the sake of David my servant!”
36 Then the angel of the Lord went out and put to death a hundred and eighty-five thousand in the Assyrian camp. When the people got up the next morning—there were all the dead bodies! 37 So Sennacherib king of Assyria broke camp and withdrew. He returned to Nineveh and stayed there.

38 One day, while he was worshiping in the temple of his god Nisrok, his sons Adrammelek and Sharezer killed him with the sword, and they escaped to the land of Ararat. And Esarhaddon his son succeeded him as king.” (Isaiah 37:21-38)

Hezekiah then became ill, and prayed mightily to God to be spared. To be sure that his promise healing had taken place, he demanded that the shadows on the Temple steps move “backwards”- a clear miracle that would be an indicator of the miracle of healing. God was pleased to give Hezekiah another 15 years of life: *“In those days Hezekiah became ill and was at the point of death. The prophet Isaiah son of Amoz went to him and said, “This is what the Lord says: Put your house in order, because you are going to die; you will not recover.”*

2 Hezekiah turned his face to the wall and prayed to the Lord, 3 “Remember, Lord, how I have walked before you faithfully and with wholehearted devotion and have done what is good in your eyes.” And Hezekiah wept bitterly.

4 Then the word of the Lord came to Isaiah: 5 “Go and tell Hezekiah, ‘This is what the Lord, the God of your father David, says: I have heard your prayer and seen

your tears; I will add fifteen years to your life. 6 And I will deliver you and this city from the hand of the king of Assyria. I will defend this city.

7 “‘This is the Lord’s sign to you that the Lord will do what he has promised: 8 I will make the shadow cast by the sun go back the ten steps it has gone down on the stairway of Ahaz.’” So the sunlight went back the ten steps it had gone down.”
(Isaiah 38:1-8)

Hezekiah was spared, but some wonder if he was truly appreciative of the extra time he was given.. What if you or I had a “guaranteed” fifteen years of health and prosperity- what would we do with it? Hezekiah was so sure of himself that he showed his papalce and all the “precious possessions” as well as the defenses to envoys of his (and Israel’s) enemies. Yet he justified it saying that he would have peace in his time, as we see in the next chapter of Isaiah (Isaiah 39).

Another small controversy exists about the miracle of the “backwards traveling shadow” in this chapter. There were reports that NASA scientists needed an “extra day” for their instruments to properly calibrate. One of the scientists, remembering this story and the story of the sun standing still in Joshua 10:13, calculated that the sun going backwards would take 23 hours and 20 minutes, and the backward traveling shadow reported here in Isaiah would consume exactly forty “extra” minutes, bringing the total to exactly 24 hours!. And thus the Scripture is seen as supporting of, and totally consistent with science (please see: https://answersingenesis.org/creationism/arguments-to-avoid/nasa-found-joshuas-missing-day/). The combination of Joshua’s sun standing still (23 hours and 20 minues) plus the 40 minutes from Isaiah would be exactly what was needed. The problem is that this story is a “legend”. When a newspaper ran this article, the NASA public relations officer was besieged by telephone requests to verify the story. Herre is what actually happened: “Jim Lacey, Public Information Officer at NASA Goddard Space Flight Center, told me, by phone, that his office was deluged with inquiries about the newspaper article. "I checked it out 40 ways, from all angles, and it has no basis in fact," he says.” (https://www.lhup.edu/~dsimanek/lostday.htm).

We must be very careful in “proving” the accuracy of the Scriptures- and never resort to less than an exhaustive examination of the truth behind stories like this one. Exposing such a legend does far more harm than good- the Scripture’s accuracy does not need “legend” to verify its truthfulness- the truth of God- His revealed truth- is never threatened by scientific- or any other- examination. The truth is just that0 the truth, and needs no “help” from us!

http://amaic2.blogspot.com/2012/01/miracle-of-sun-fatima-and-king-hezekiah.html

Philippians 3

Paul assures the Philppians that ther is “no confidence” in the flesh. We simply cannot earn righteousness unless we keep the Law perfectly. If there were anyone who could do such an impossible thing, he argues, it would be a person like himself with all the credentials that he possessed: *“Further, my brothers and sisters, rejoice in the Lord! It is no trouble for me to write the same things to you again, and it is a safeguard for you. 2 Watch out for those dogs, those evildoers, those mutilators of the flesh. 3 For it is we who are the circumcision, we who serve God by his Spirit, who boast in Christ Jesus, and who put no confidence in the flesh— 4 though I myself have reasons for such confidence.*

If someone else thinks they have reasons to put confidence in the flesh, I have more: 5 circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; in regard to the law, a Pharisee; 6 as for zeal, persecuting the church; as for righteousness based on the law, faultless.

7 But whatever were gains to me I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. 8 What is more, I consider everything a loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them garbage, that I may gain Christ 9 and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in[a] Christ—the righteousness that comes from God on the basis of faith.” (Phil. 3:1-9). Paul essentially says that his righteousness is “garbage”- that only through faith can we obtain righteousness that will satisfy Gosd’s need for righteousness in His creatures. The righteousness of Jesus Himself- who actually led a sinless life- led to our ability- through the shedding of His blood- for us to obtain righteousness. We claim- by faith- the covering and cleansing that comes only from His shed blood.

Paul never claims to have “arrived” spiritually, but he sees his role, and his walk, as one of a person who “presses on” toward the prize- just as a runner in a race does: “Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already arrived at my goal, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me. 13 Brothers and

sisters, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, 14 I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus." (Phil. 3:12-14)

The apostle then urges the church in Phillip to "follow his example" as one whose citizenship is in heaven: *"But our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ, 21 who, by the power that enables him to bring everything under his control, will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body."* (Phil. 3:20-21). We, like the Lord Jesus, will be ransformed into a glorious state with a "resurrection body". What a promise…what a Savior!!

Isaiah 39-40 October 8, 2014 Philippians 4

Hezekiah was promised 15 "extra" years of prosperity, and one of the very foolish things he did with this time was to show the palace, the "valuable" items in the Temple, and the fortifications of the city of Jerusalem to enemies of Israel- the Babylonians. The description in Isaiah is as follows: *"At that time Marduk-Baladan son of Baladan king of Babylon sent Hezekiah letters and a gift, because he had heard of his illness and recovery. 2 Hezekiah received the envoys gladly and showed them what was in his storehouses—the silver, the gold, the spices, the fine olive oil —his entire armory and everything found among his treasures. There was nothing in his palace or in all his kingdom that Hezekiah did not show them.3 Then Isaiah the prophet went to King Hezekiah and asked, "What did those men say, and where did they come from?" "From a distant land," Hezekiah replied. "They came to me from Babylon." The prophet asked, "What did they see in your palace?" "They saw everything in my palace," Hezekiah said. "There is nothing among my treasures that I did not show them."*(Isaiah 39: 1-4).

Hezekiah may have been feeling this largesse because of the letters and gift sent from the king of Babylon's son- Marduk Baladan once the king's son heard about Hezekiah's miraculous recovery. Isaiah was very pointed in his response to this recklessness- he told Hezekiah that only bad things would result from this error in judgment: *"Then Isaiah said to Hezekiah, "Hear the word of the Lord Almighty: 6 The time will surely come when everything in your palace, and all that your predecessors have stored up until this day, will be carried off to Babylon. Nothing will be left, says the Lord. 7 And some of your descendants, your own flesh and blood who will be born to you, will be taken away, and they will become eunuchs in the palace of the king of Babylon."* (Isaiah 39:5-7). Hezekiah's response is, to paraphrase- OK, but I don't care because this doesn't affect me! Here is what the Scripture says: *"The word of the Lord you have spoken is good," Hezekiah replied. For he thought, "There will be peace and security in my lifetime."* (Isaiah 39:8).

Isaiah 40 is one of several sections in this book that has been set to music. The masterpiece "The Messiah" by George Frederick Handel includes an "Accompagnato" for a tenor voice entitled *"Comfort Ye, My People"* based on this first part of Isaiah 40 (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Messiah_Part_I#2). The lyrics are taken directly from Isaiah 40:1-3 in the King James Version of the Scripture: *"Comfort ye, comfort ye my people, saith your God. 2 Speak ye comfortably to Jerusalem, and cry unto her, that her warfare is accomplished, that her iniquity is*

pardoned: for she hath received of the Lord's hand double for all her sins. 3 The voice of him that crieth in the wilderness, Prepare ye the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God." (Isaiah 40:1-3 KJV)

The words of Isaiah are comforting in that they point to a time that is coming when the very Spirit of God will reside on one who will save His people. Christian scholars are nearly unanimous in this prophesy being Messianic. The structure of Handel's masterwork follows Isaiah 40 into two succeeding sections- 1) *Ev'ry valley shall be exalted* (tenor); 2) *And the glory of the Lord* (chorus). These lyrics follow the King James translation very closely. *"Every valley shall be exalted, and every mountain and hill shall be made low: and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough places plain:5 And the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together: for the mouth of the Lord hath spoken it."* (Isaiah 40:4-5 KJV)

A succeeding section of the Messiah is based on Isaiah 40: 9 "*O thou that tellest good tidings to Zion* (alto and chorus)" Isaiah 40:9 reads like this:
"You who bring good news to Zion, go up on a high mountain.
You who bring good news to Jerusalem,[c]
lift up your voice with a shout,
lift it up, do not be afraid;
say to the towns of Judah,
"Here is your God!" (Isaiah 40:9)

This One who is coming will be a tender Shepherd, gathering His people to Him and protecting and comforting them:
"See, the Sovereign Lord comes with power,
and he rules with a mighty arm.
See, his reward is with him,
and his recompense accompanies him.
11 He tends his flock like a shepherd:
He gathers the lambs in his arms
and carries them close to his heart;
he gently leads those that have young." (Isaiah 40:10-11)

God then reveals His character and personality to us, listing His deeds and creativity for our benefit:
"Do you not know?
Have you not heard?
Has it not been told you from the beginning?
Have you not understood since the earth was founded?
22 He sits enthroned above the circle of the earth,
and its people are like grasshoppers.
He stretches out the heavens like a canopy,
and spreads them out like a tent to live in.
23 He brings princes to naught
and reduces the rulers of this world to nothing.
24 No sooner are they planted,
no sooner are they sown,
no sooner do they take root in the ground,
than he blows on them and they wither,

and a whirlwind sweeps them away like chaff.
25 “To whom will you compare me?
Or who is my equal?” says the Holy One.
26 Lift up your eyes and look to the heavens:
Who created all these?
He who brings out the starry host one by one
and calls forth each of them by name.
Because of his great power and mighty strength,
not one of them is missing.
27 Why do you complain, Jacob?
Why do you say, Israel,
“My way is hidden from the Lord;
my cause is disregarded by my God”?
28 Do you not know?
Have you not heard?
The Lord is the everlasting God,
the Creator of the ends of the earth.
He will not grow tired or weary,
and his understanding no one can fathom.” (Isaiah 40:21-28)

And this God is one who gives strength, even to the weary. So many times when I was a “more serious” runner I rmembered these verses. I also claimed them for my son during his rigorous training at Paris Island in the Marine Corps:
“He gives strength to the weary
and increases the power of the weak.
30 Even youths grow tired and weary,
and young men stumble and fall;
31 but those who hope in the Lord
will renew their strength.
They will soar on wings like eagles;
they will run and not grow weary,
they will walk and not be faint.” (Isaiah 40:29-31)

Philippians 4

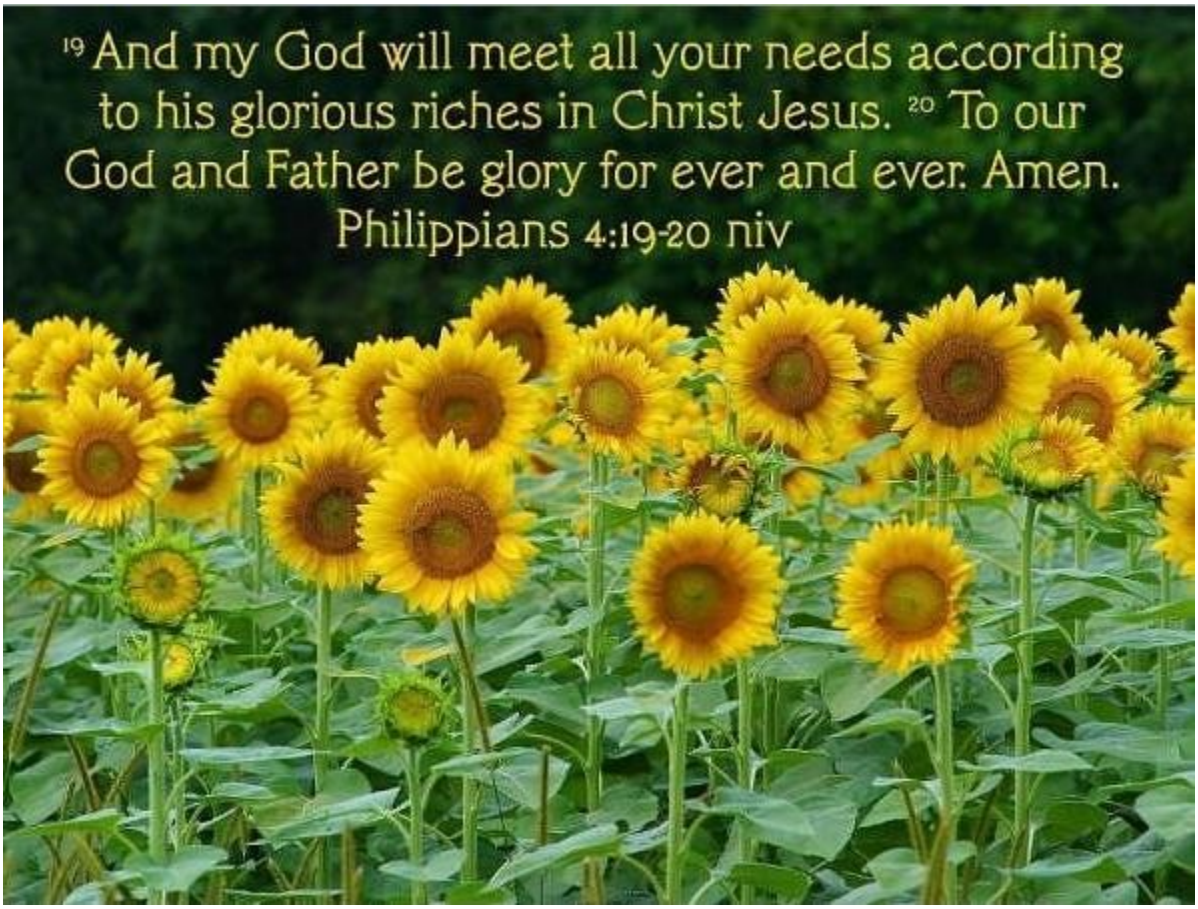
Paul then prays for steadfastness and unity in the church, mentioning several of his coworkers and leadres in the church by name: *“Therefore, my brothers and sisters, you whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, stand firm in the Lord in this way, dear friends! 2 I plead with Euodia and I plead with Syntyche to be of the same mind in the Lord. 3 Yes, and I ask you, my true companion, help these women since they have contended at my side in the cause of the gospel, along with Clement and the rest of my co-workers, whose names are in the book of life.”* (Phil. 4:1-3) What a great tribute to have Paul himself state as a matter of fact that your name is in the Book of Life (Rev. 20:12)!

Rejoice! Rejoice in the LORD always! We often rejoice in things other than Him… but our greatest rejoicing comes when we realize the debt of love and gratitude we owe our Redeemer and Savior: *“Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! 5 Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near. 6 Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with*

thanksgiving, present your requests to God. 7 And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus." (Phil. 4:4-7). The result of our rejoiceing is PEACE- the peace of God which is umnlike any other. This peace is 'active"- it will literally "guard our minds and hearts"!

Paul states that he has learned to be satisfied in plenty and in want, in being contented in each and every circumstance. Finally he gives thanks, first to those who have loved him and provided for his needs, and finally and ultimately, to the God who provides all of his needs and is equipped and disposed to do so*: "Yet it was good of you to share in my troubles. 15 Moreover, as you Philippians know, in the early days of your acquaintance with the gospel, when I set out from Macedonia, not one church shared with me in the matter of giving and receiving, except you only; 16 for even when I was in Thessalonica, you sent me aid more than once when I was in need. 17 Not that I desire your gifts; what I desire is that more be credited to your account. 18 I have received full payment and have more than enough. I am amply supplied, now that I have received from Epaphroditus the gifts you sent. They are a fragrant offering, an acceptable sacrifice, pleasing to God. 19 And my God will meet all your needs according to the riches of his glory in Christ Jesus."* (Phil. 4:14-19)

http://creativeoutburst.com/photography/



http://dwellingintheword.wordpress.com/2014/02/18/1252-philippians-4/

Isaiah 41-42 October 9, 2014 Colossians 1

God asserts once again that he is the Protector and Defender and Friend to His people Israel. Much as He told Job of His creative power and genius, he challenges "all" to come and see who he truly is:

"Be silent before me, you islands!
Let the nations renew their strength!
Let them come forward and speak;
let us meet together at the place of judgment.
2 "Who has stirred up one from the east,
calling him in righteousness to his service[a]?
He hands nations over to him
and subdues kings before him.
He turns them to dust with his sword,
to windblown chaff with his bow.
3 He pursues them and moves on unscathed,
by a path his feet have not traveled before.
4 Who has done this and carried it through,
calling forth the generations from the beginning?
I, the Lord—with the first of them
and with the last—I am he." (Isaiah 41:1-4)

God further explains that he has chosen Israel and that all who come up against her will ultimately fail:

“But you, Israel, my servant,
Jacob, whom I have chosen,
you descendants of Abraham my friend,
9 I took you from the ends of the earth,
from its farthest corners I called you.
I said, ‘You are my servant’;
I have chosen you and have not rejected you.
10 So do not fear, for I am with you;
do not be dismayed, for I am your God.
I will strengthen you and help you;
I will uphold you with my righteous right hand.
11 “All who rage against you
will surely be ashamed and disgraced;
those who oppose you
will be as nothing and perish.
12 Though you search for your enemies,
you will not find them.
Those who wage war against you
will be as nothing at all.
13 For I am the Lord your God
who takes hold of your right hand
and says to you, Do not fear;
I will help you.” (Isaiah 41:8-13)

God further asserts that he will be the provider of life-giving water and sustenance to all- especially the poor and needy. This is parallel to Jesus’ remark, not only to the woman at the well (John 4:10-14) but at the great festival (John 7:37) “On the last and greatest day of the festival, Jesus stood and said in a loud voice, "Let anyone who is thirsty come to me and drink.”. God states that he is the source of all water:

“The poor and needy search for water,
but there is none;
their tongues are parched with thirst.
But I the Lord will answer them;
I, the God of Israel, will not forsake them.
18 I will make rivers flow on barren heights,
and springs within the valleys.
I will turn the desert into pools of water,
and the parched ground into springs.
19 I will put in the desert
the cedar and the acacia, the myrtle and the olive.
I will set junipers in the wasteland,
the fir and the cypress together,
20 so that people may see and know,
may consider and understand,
that the hand of the Lord has done this,
that the Holy One of Israel has created it.” (Isaiah 41:17-20)

God then challendges the “idols” to produce anything worthwhile- and shows His great disgust not only for the idols but those who make and worship them:

“Present your case,” says the Lord.
“Set forth your arguments,” says Jacob’s King.
22 “Tell us, you idols,
what is going to happen.
Tell us what the former things were,
so that we may consider them
and know their final outcome.
Or declare to us the things to come,
23 tell us what the future holds,
so we may know that you are gods.
Do something, whether good or bad,
so that we will be dismayed and filled with fear.
24 But you are less than nothing
and your works are utterly worthless;
whoever chooses you is detestable.” (Isaiah 41:21-24)

In Isaiah 42 we see more of the Messianic prophecies that are sprinkled liberally throughout this book. The imagery here is of a servant in which God finds “delight” and who is gifted with the very Spirit of God:
“Here is my servant, whom I uphold,
my chosen one in whom I delight;
I will put my Spirit on him,
and he will bring justice to the nations.
2 He will not shout or cry out,
or raise his voice in the streets.
3 A bruised reed he will not break,
and a smoldering wick he will not snuff out.
In faithfulness he will bring forth justice;
4 he will not falter or be discouraged
till he establishes justice on earth.
In his teaching the islands will put their hope.” (Isaiah 42:1-4)

The God patiently explains why he has called Israel to be His people- not because they were “special” or “better” than other people, but because He wished them to be a blessing to the nations, a source of light and truth and a people that uniquely pointed others to the God of the universe- the one true God:
“This is what God the Lord says—
the Creator of the heavens, who stretches them out,
who spreads out the earth with all that springs from it,
who gives breath to its people,
and life to those who walk on it:
6 “I, the Lord, have called you in righteousness;
I will take hold of your hand.
I will keep you and will make you
to be a covenant for the people
and a light for the Gentiles,

7 to open eyes that are blind,
to free captives from prison
and to release from the dungeon those who sit in darkness." (Isaiah 42:5-7)

God will not allow other "gods" to take His place- he is the God who will not allow any other "gods"- especially idols of any kind- to take a place of preference over Him:

"I am the Lord; that is my name!
I will not yield my glory to another
or my praise to idols.
9 See, the former things have taken place,
and new things I declare;
before they spring into being
I announce them to you." (Isaiah 42:8-9)

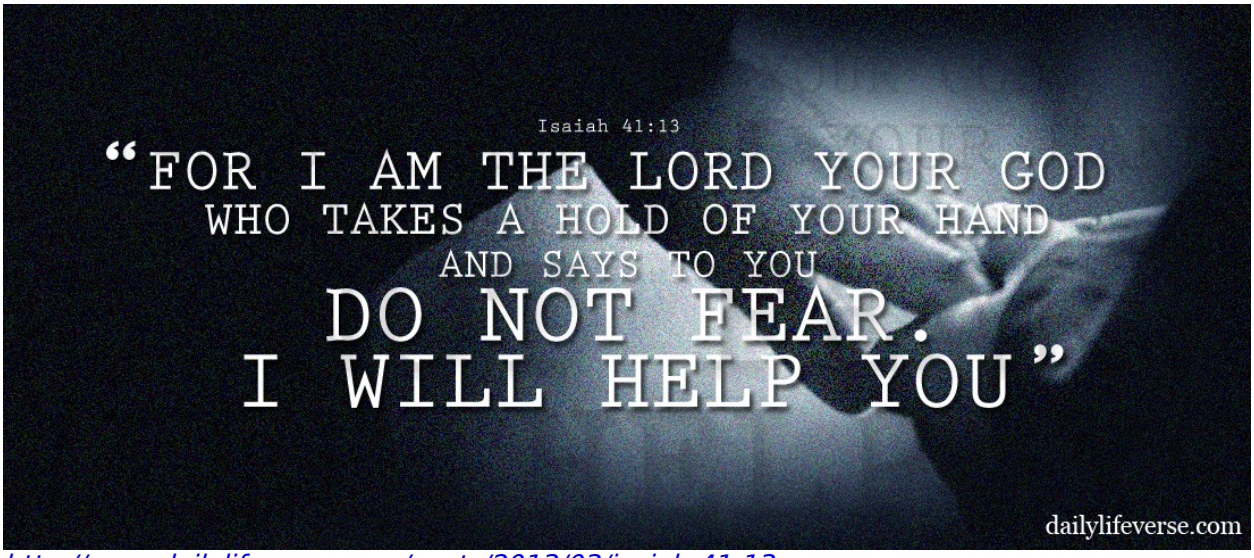
What is our proper response to such a wonderful creator God?…praise!!

"Sing to the Lord a new song,
his praise from the ends of the earth,
you who go down to the sea, and all that is in it,
you islands, and all who live in them.
11 Let the wilderness and its towns raise their voices;
let the settlements where Kedar lives rejoice.
Let the people of Sela sing for joy;
let them shout from the mountaintops.
12 Let them give glory to the Lord
and proclaim his praise in the islands.
13 The Lord will march out like a champion,
like a warrior he will stir up his zeal;
with a shout he will raise the battle cry
and will triumph over his enemies." (Isaiah 42:10-13)

Instead of praise and adoration, Israel instead has become "deaf" and "blind" – perhaps so they could not see God's way and could only see their own:

"Hear, you deaf;
look, you blind, and see!
19 Who is blind but my servant,
and deaf like the messenger I send?
Who is blind like the one in covenant with me,
blind like the servant of the Lord?
20 You have seen many things, but you pay no attention;
your ears are open, but you do not listen."
21 It pleased the Lord
for the sake of his righteousness
to make his law great and glorious.
22 But this is a people plundered and looted,
all of them trapped in pits
or hidden away in prisons.
They have become plunder,
with no one to rescue them;

they have been made loot,
with no one to say, "Send them back." (Isaiah 42:18-22)



http://www.dailylifeverse.com/posts/2013/03/isaiah-41-13

Colossians 1

Among the many churches that Paul planted and nurtured was the one in Colossae. Some background is useful here: *"Cities grow as they develop commercial centers that provide jobs for their residents. The ancient city of Colossae was built on a major trade route through the Lycus River Valley in the Roman province of Asia Minor (in the southwest corner of modern-day Turkey). There the Colossians manufactured a beautiful dark red wool cloth (colossinum) for which the city became famous. But Colossae's importance as a business center diminished significantly around 100 B.C. when the neighboring city of Laodicea was founded as an active and commercially aggressive competitor. The two towns, along with neighboring Hierapolis, were destroyed by earthquakes in 17 A.D. (in the reign of Tiberius) and again in 60 (in the reign of Nero). Rebuilt after each earthquake, Colossae never regained its early prominence and by 400 the city no longer existed. The apostle Paul had spent two years planting a church in Ephesus, and in Acts 19:10 we learn that, radiating from that center, "all the residents of Asia, both Jews and Greeks, heard the word of the Lord." Whether Paul himself fanned out in missionary activity throughout the province or whether some of his converts did so, a church was planted in Colossae. It is likely that Epaphras founded the Colossian church (Col. 1:7), and from 1:21 we assume that the church was composed mainly of Gentiles."*
(http://www.theologyofwork.org/new-testament/colossians-philemon/background-on-colossae-and-the-colossians/).

Paul, always the pastor, wrote warm greetings to this church and commended them on their faithfulness and good works: *"Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of*

God, and Timothy our brother, To God's holy people in Colossae, the faithful brothers and sisters[a] in Christ:
Grace and peace to you from God our Father." (Col. 1:1-2)

Thanks is given not only for their faithfulness but also for their love for each other and for God, which is a manifestation of the Spirit of God working among them: *"We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you, 4 because we have heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love you have for all God's people— 5 the faith and love that spring from the hope stored up for you in heaven and about which you have already heard in the true message of the gospel 6 that has come to you. In the same way, the gospel is bearing fruit and growing throughout the whole world—just as it has been doing among you since the day you heard it and truly understood God's grace. 7 You learned it from Epaphras, our dear fellow servant,[c] who is a faithful minister of Christ on our[d] behalf, 8 and who also told us of your love in the Spirit."* (Col. 1:3-7). Notice that Epaphrus is given credit for teaching the how to love as God loves in verse 7.

In language reminiscent of that in Hebrews 1, Paul reminds the church of the central role that Christ plays in the church- he is the Author of every good thing and the perfect representation of God: *"The Son is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. 16 For in him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things have been created through him and for him. 17 He is before all things, and in him all things hold together. 18 And he is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything he might have the supremacy. 19 For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, 20 and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross. 21 Once you were alienated from God and were enemies in your minds because of[g] your evil behavior. 22 But now he has reconciled you by Christ's physical body through death to present you holy in his sight, without blemish and free from accusation— 23 if you continue in your faith, established and firm, and do not move from the hope held out in the gospel. This is the gospel that you heard and that has been proclaimed to every creature under heaven, and of which I, Paul, have become a servant."* (Col. 1:15-23)

Paul then reminds them of the suffering he has gladly endured for their sakes and for the building up of the church*: "Now I rejoice in what I am suffering for you, and I fill up in my flesh what is still lacking in regard to Christ's afflictions, for the sake of his body, which is the church. 25 I have become its servant by the commission God gave me to present to you the word of God in its fullness— 26 the mystery that has been kept hidden for ages and generations, but is now disclosed to the Lord's people. 27 To them God has chosen to make known among the Gentiles the glorious riches of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory."* (Colossians 1:24-27). We see further evidence that this is a church made up largely of Gentiles, in that Paul refers to the revelation of the "glorious riches of this mystery" which was made known to them! How wonderful it must have been to hear these words of encouragement and truth.

Just as the Lord instructed Isaiah to “comfort” His people (Isaiah 40). He now assures Isaiah that he will be the friend and protector of His people:

“But now, this is what the Lord says—
he who created you, Jacob,
he who formed you, Israel:
“Do not fear, for I have redeemed you;
I have summoned you by name; you are mine.
2 When you pass through the waters,
I will be with you;
and when you pass through the rivers,
they will not sweep over you.
When you walk through the fire,
you will not be burned;
the flames will not set you ablaze.
3 For I am the Lord your God,
the Holy One of Israel, your Savior;
I give Egypt for your ransom,
Cush and Seba in your stead.
4 Since you are precious and honored in my sight,
and because I love you,
I will give people in exchange for you,
nations in exchange for your life.
5 Do not be afraid, for I am with you;
I will bring your children from the east
and gather you from the west.” (Isaiah 43:1-5)

We can clearly see that God is acting in a way that is a clear “type” of His actions later in human history when he send the Son to be the Savior/Emmanuel- but God is- and always has been a Savior to His people! The uniqueness of God’s action in sending the Son (John 1) should not and cannot be overlooked, but he has always played this role with His children.

God repeats this assertion of His unique role, stating the he alone is the Savior and Protector and Creator- no one can stand against His hand:

“I, even I, am the Lord,
and apart from me there is no savior.
12 I have revealed and saved and proclaimed—
I, and not some foreign god among you.
You are my witnesses,” declares the Lord, “that I am God.
13 Yes, and from ancient days I am he.
No one can deliver out of my hand.
When I act, who can reverse it?” (Isaiah 43:11-13)

Then God states clearly that he has been the Protector, the Provider and the One who keeps the covenant, but His people endlessly wander, ignore Him, disobey Him and give only half hearted worship- this is in a sense a capsule summary of the entire Old Testament.

Israel was uniquely “chosen” for a particular role in human history. We have seen earlier that this nation was to be a “light to the gentiles”. Here we see the particularly clos e relationship that God has desired between Himself and the

people. We also see that we were “formed in the womb”- a strong suggestion that life, after all, begins with conception. We were “people” that God uniquely loved and cared for before the moment of our birth (verse 2):

“But now listen, Jacob, my servant,
Israel, whom I have chosen.
2 This is what the Lord says—
he who made you, who formed you in the womb,
and who will help you:
Do not be afraid, Jacob, my servant,
Jeshurun, whom I have chosen.
3 For I will pour water on the thirsty land,
and streams on the dry ground;
I will pour out my Spirit on your offspring,
and my blessing on your descendants.
4 They will spring up like grass in a meadow,
like poplar trees by flowing streams.
5 Some will say, ‘I belong to the Lord’;
others will call themselves by the name of Jacob;
still others will write on their hand, ‘The Lord’s,’
and will take the name Israel.” (Isaiah 44:1-5).

Once again God makes His argument over the incredible stupidity of making and worshipping idols. He argument is clear and compelling…”How can you worship something that you also used to cook your food?” (my paraphrase). ON one hand the idol is created by human hands, then once created it is worshipped. One might offer the argument that the “hand made” idol is a “representation” of the true “god”- even so this is a practice that is expressly forbidden by God. We must never put a created thing into a category that is uncreated- only the truly uncreated God is worthy of our devotion and worship!

“All who make idols are nothing,
and the things they treasure are worthless.
Those who would speak up for them are blind;
they are ignorant, to their own shame.
10 Who shapes a god and casts an idol,
which can profit nothing?
11 People who do that will be put to shame;
such craftsmen are only human beings.
Let them all come together and take their stand;
they will be brought down to terror and shame.
12 The blacksmith takes a tool
and works with it in the coals;
he shapes an idol with hammers,
he forges it with the might of his arm.
He gets hungry and loses his strength;
he drinks no water and grows faint.
13 The carpenter measures with a line
and makes an outline with a marker;
he roughs it out with chisels
and marks it with compasses.
He shapes it in human form,

human form in all its glory,
that it may dwell in a shrine.
14 He cut down cedars,
or perhaps took a cypress or oak.
He let it grow among the trees of the forest,
or planted a pine, and the rain made it grow.
15 It is used as fuel for burning;
some of it he takes and warms himself,
he kindles a fire and bakes bread.
But he also fashions a god and worships it;
he makes an idol and bows down to it.
16 Half of the wood he burns in the fire;
over it he prepares his meal,
he roasts his meat and eats his fill.
He also warms himself and says,
"Ah! I am warm; I see the fire."
17 From the rest he makes a god, his idol;
he bows down to it and worships.
He prays to it and says,
"Save me! You are my god!"
18 They know nothing, they understand nothing;
their eyes are plastered over so they cannot see,
and their minds closed so they cannot understand.
19 No one stops to think,
no one has the knowledge or understanding to say,
"Half of it I used for fuel;
I even baked bread over its coals,
I roasted meat and I ate.
Shall I make a detestable thing from what is left?" (Isaiah 44:9-19)

Finally, God promises that the cities- especially Jerusalem- will be reinhabited. This was a comfort indeed to the people who were in exile. They wanted nothing more than to re-enter and re-populate the land that God had promised them:

"This is what the Lord says—
your Redeemer, who formed you in the womb:
I am the Lord,
the Maker of all things,
who stretches out the heavens,
who spreads out the earth by myself,
25 who foils the signs of false prophets
and makes fools of diviners,
who overthrows the learning of the wise
and turns it into nonsense,
26 who carries out the words of his servants
and fulfills the predictions of his messengers,
who says of Jerusalem, 'It shall be inhabited,'
of the towns of Judah, 'They shall be rebuilt,'
and of their ruins, 'I will restore them,'
27 who says to the watery deep, 'Be dry,
and I will dry up your streams,'

28 who says of Cyrus, 'He is my shepherd
and will accomplish all that I please;
he will say of Jerusalem, "Let it be rebuilt,"
and of the temple, "Let its foundations be laid."" (Isaiah 44:24-28)

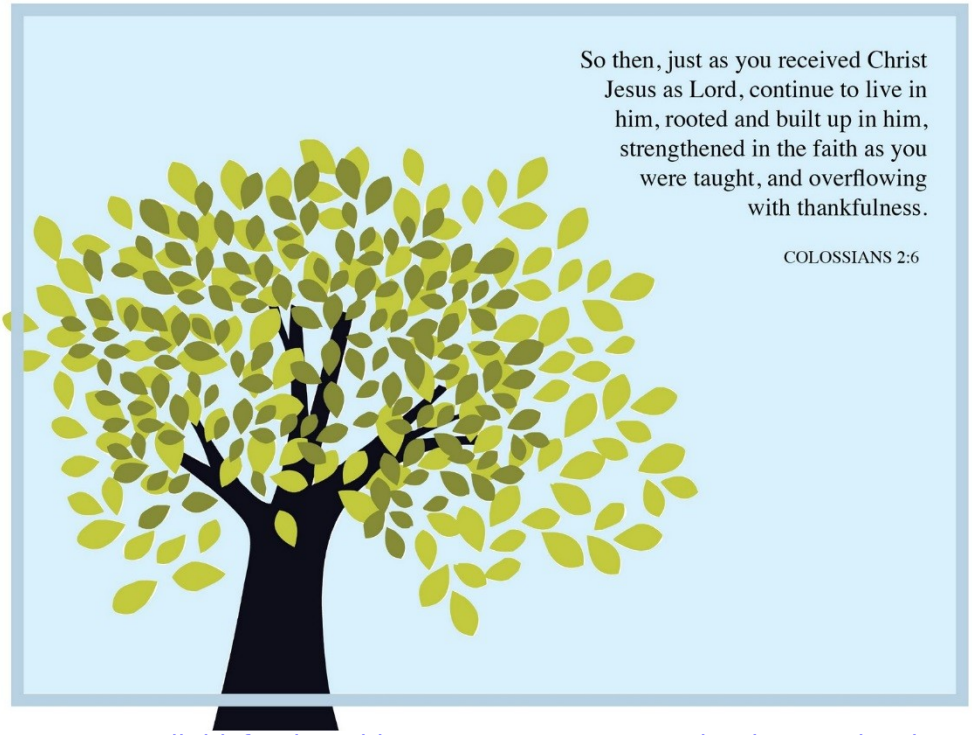
Colossians 2

The pastoral role can be a difficult one. The pastor is the good shepherd, who learns about, loves and protects the "flock" that he is responsible for. Paul shows this pastoral spirit and gift here in his caring for and advocating for the Christian believers at Colossae. He reminds them that even if he is not physically present with them that he is with them in the spirit: *"I want you to know how hard I am contending for you and for those at Laodicea, and for all who have not met me personally. 2 My goal is that they may be encouraged in heart and united in love, so that they may have the full riches of complete understanding, in order that they may know the mystery of God, namely, Christ, 3 in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. 4 I tell you this so that no one may deceive you by fine-sounding arguments. 5 For though I am absent from you in body, I am present with you in spirit and delight to see how disciplined you are and how firm your faith in Christ is."* (Col. 2: 1-5)

One of my favorite contemporary Christian songs is "Fill My Cup, Lord" The lyrics of this song remind us of the warmth and fulfilment we receive when we ask and receive from God Himself. There is no other "filling" that comes even close to what we receive from Him. Paul urges the church to be "filled" with God- to allow Him to work His wonderful ways in their very lives and spirits: *"So then, just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live your lives in him, 7 rooted and built up in him, strengthened in the faith as you were taught, and overflowing with thankfulness. 8 See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the elemental spiritual forces[a] of this world rather than on Christ. 9 For in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form, 10 and in Christ you have been brought to fullness. He is the head over every power and authority. 11 In him you were also circumcised with a circumcision not performed by human hands. Your whole self ruled by the flesh[b] was put off when you were circumcised by Christ, 12 having been buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through your faith in the working of God, who raised him from the dead. 13 When you were dead in your sins and in the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made you alive with Christ. He forgave us all our sins, 14 having canceled the charge of our legal indebtedness, which stood against us and condemned us; he has taken it away, nailing it to the cross. 15 And having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross."* (Col. 2:6-15). We who were "dead" are now alive in Christ. We must remember this truth so we can avoid the pitfalls and perils of listening to and following those who would mislead us away from God's truth.

There is real freedom in Christ! I remember with some sadness how my Mother, in her later years, left her conservative upbringing and studied the Unity movement.

In my opinion she was rebelling against the “rules and legalism” she had been raised with, which were the unfortunate “cultural tie-ins” with her otherwise sound teaching she received in her childhood church. Paul here warns us against the trap of “legalism” or “rules Christianity”. He is simply applying the great principles that Jesus taught on the Sermon on the Mount/Plain in Matthew 5 and Luke 6. Jesus clearly taught *“For I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven.”* (Matthew 5:20). So how can our righteousness “exceed” that of the experts in the Law, who were so careful to follow each commandment? Simply by living a life rooted in God’s love! The attitudes of our heart, and the devotion we have to God and our desire to please Him in everything is the Christian’s replacmenet for “rules religion”! Paul wrote: *“Since you died with Christ to the elemental spiritual forces of this world, why, as though you still belonged to the world, do you submit to its rules: 21 “Do not handle! Do not taste! Do not touch!”? 22 These rules, which have to do with things that are all destined to perish with use, are based on merely human commands and teachings. 23 Such regulations indeed have an appearance of wisdom, with their self-imposed worship, their false humility and their harsh treatment of the body, but they lack any value in restraining sensual indulgence.”* (Col. 2:20-23) So, in summary, the “rules” are not even effective in controlling our conduct. The sin nature that we have, and the origin of our sin, is a force within us which can only be conquered with God’s own Holy Spirit. It is the Sprirt filled and Spriit controlled life that we are called to live, so that we may be truly empowered and effective in our walk!



http://coveredinhisfeathers.blogspot.com/2010/07/colossians-26.html

Isaiah 45-47 October 11, 2014 Colossians 3

So why Cyrus?-a pagan king/ruler? Why is God commending him and promising him success? This is part of God's mystery as he works among us to accomplish His good works. Matthew Henry's commentary is helpful here: *"Cyrus is called God's anointed; he was designed and qualified for his great service by the counsel of God. The gates of Babylon which led to the river, were left open the night that Cyrus marched his army into the empty channel. The Lord went before him, giving entrance to the cities he besieged. He gave him also treasures, which had been hidden in secret places. The true God was to Cyrus an unknown God; yet God foreknew him; he called him by his name. The exact fulfilment of this must have shown Cyrus that Jehovah was the only true God, and that it was for the sake of Israel that he was prospered. In all the changes of states and kingdoms, God works out the good of his church."* The Scripture reads like this:

"This is what the Lord says to his anointed,
to Cyrus, whose right hand I take hold of
to subdue nations before him
and to strip kings of their armor,
to open doors before him
so that gates will not be shut:
2 I will go before you
and will level the mountains[a];
I will break down gates of bronze
and cut through bars of iron.
3 I will give you hidden treasures,
riches stored in secret places,
so that you may know that I am the Lord,
the God of Israel, who summons you by name.
4 For the sake of Jacob my servant,
of Israel my chosen,
I summon you by name
and bestow on you a title of honor,
though you do not acknowledge me." (Isaiah 47:1-4)

God reminds us through Isaiah that he is in charge, and he alone is the final arbiter and primal moving force in everything that happens. He raises up Cyrus for His own purposes, and we are to simply submit to His will and wishes for us:

"This is what the Lord says—
the Holy One of Israel, and its Maker:
Concerning things to come,
do you question me about my children,
or give me orders about the work of my hands?
12 It is I who made the earth
and created mankind on it.
My own hands stretched out the heavens;
I marshaled their starry hosts.
13 I will raise up Cyrus[b] in my righteousness:
I will make all his ways straight.
He will rebuild my city
and set my exiles free,
but not for a price or reward,

says the Lord Almighty." (Isaiah 45:11-13)
The enemies of God's people will be conquered, and God Himself will be seen in glory as the Savior of all peoples:
This is what the Lord says:

"The products of Egypt and the merchandise of Cush,
and those tall Sabeans—
they will come over to you
and will be yours;
they will trudge behind you,
coming over to you in chains.
They will bow down before you
and plead with you, saying,
'Surely God is with you, and there is no other;
there is no other god.'"
15 Truly you are a God who has been hiding himself,
the God and Savior of Israel.
16 All the makers of idols will be put to shame and disgraced;
they will go off into disgrace together.
17 But Israel will be saved by the Lord
with an everlasting salvation;
you will never be put to shame or disgraced,
to ages everlasting." (Isaiah 45:14-17)

God then clearly describes how we are to be saved- by turning to Him and abandoning all else and all others:
"Turn to me and be saved,
all you ends of the earth;
for I am God, and there is no other.
23 By myself I have sworn,
my mouth has uttered in all integrity
a word that will not be revoked:
Before me every knee will bow;
by me every tongue will swear.
24 They will say of me, 'In the Lord alone
are deliverance and strength.'"
All who have raged against him
will come to him and be put to shame.
25 But all the descendants of Israel
will find deliverance in the Lord
and will make their boast in him." (Isaiah 45:22-25)
The language in verse 23 is parallel to that in Philippians 2:10-11: *"that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father."* Is this an "accident"? I think not! Once more we see the symmetry and order of the Scriptures. These words were written nearly a thousand years apart from each other by different authors and to different audiences, yet they clearly show the unity of all Scripture!

Ironically, the “gods” of the Babylonian captors are themselves taken off into captivity. God is showing once again how he can rule and overrule in human affairs:

“Bel bows down, Nebo stoops low;
their idols are borne by beasts of burden.[d]
The images that are carried about are burdensome,
a burden for the weary.
2 They stoop and bow down together;
unable to rescue the burden,
they themselves go off into captivity.” (Isaiah 46:1-2)

God’s purpose here is to bring salvation to His people, and to defeat the enemy/captor Babylon. His will is the deciding factor, and we must remind ourselves of this truth daily:

“Remember this, keep it in mind,
take it to heart, you rebels.
9 Remember the former things, those of long ago;
I am God, and there is no other;
I am God, and there is none like me.
10 I make known the end from the beginning,
from ancient times, what is still to come.
I say, ‘My purpose will stand,
and I will do all that I please.’
11 From the east I summon a bird of prey;
from a far-off land, a man to fulfill my purpose.
What I have said, that I will bring about;
what I have planned, that I will do.
12 Listen to me, you stubborn-hearted,
you who are now far from my righteousness.
13 I am bringing my righteousness near,
it is not far away;
and my salvation will not be delayed.
I will grant salvation to Zion,
my splendor to Israel.” (Isaiah 46:8-13)

The fate of Babylon is sealed- no more will these proud people have the power and influence they once enjoyed- they will be reduced to shame and defeat:

“Go down, sit in the dust,
Virgin Daughter Babylon;
sit on the ground without a throne,
queen city of the Babylonians.
No more will you be called
tender or delicate.
2 Take millstones and grind flour;
take off your veil.
Lift up your skirts, bare your legs,
and wade through the streams.
3 Your nakedness will be exposed
and your shame uncovered.
I will take vengeance;
I will spare no one.”

4 Our Redeemer—the Lord Almighty is his name—
is the Holy One of Israel.
5 “Sit in silence, go into darkness,
queen city of the Babylonians;
no more will you be called
queen of kingdoms.” (Isaiah 47:1-5)

The people of Babylon will seek out their “astrologers and stargazers” but these will not stand against the true God:
“Now then, listen, you lover of pleasure,
lounging in your security
and saying to yourself,
‘I am, and there is none besides me.
I will never be a widow
or suffer the loss of children.’
9 Both of these will overtake you
in a moment, on a single day:
loss of children and widowhood.
They will come upon you in full measure,
in spite of your many sorceries
and all your potent spells.
10 You have trusted in your wickedness
and have said, ‘No one sees me.’
Your wisdom and knowledge mislead you
when you say to yourself,
‘I am, and there is none besides me.’
11 Disaster will come upon you,
and you will not know how to conjure it away.
A calamity will fall upon you
that you cannot ward off with a ransom;
a catastrophe you cannot foresee
will suddenly come upon you.
12 “Keep on, then, with your magic spells
and with your many sorceries,
which you have labored at since childhood.
Perhaps you will succeed,
perhaps you will cause terror.
13 All the counsel you have received has only worn you out!
Let your astrologers come forward,
those stargazers who make predictions month by month,
let them save you from what is coming upon you.
14 Surely they are like stubble;
the fire will burn them up.
They cannot even save themselves
from the power of the flame.” (Isaiah 47:8-14).

Colossians 3

We have been made alive in Christ! What does this mean for us in a practical way? Ultimately, then, how shall we live to reflect this great gift? Paul gives us an outline

of the characteristics and properties of the redeemend and grateful life: *"Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. 2 Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things. 3 For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God. 4 When Christ, who is your life, appears, then you also will appear with him in glory. 5 Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, which is idolatry. 6 Because of these, the wrath of God is coming. 7 You used to walk in these ways, in the life you once lived. 8 But now you must also rid yourselves of all such things as these: anger, rage, malice, slander, and filthy language from your lips. 9 Do not lie to each other, since you have taken off your old self with its practices 10 and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator."* (Col. 3:1-10).

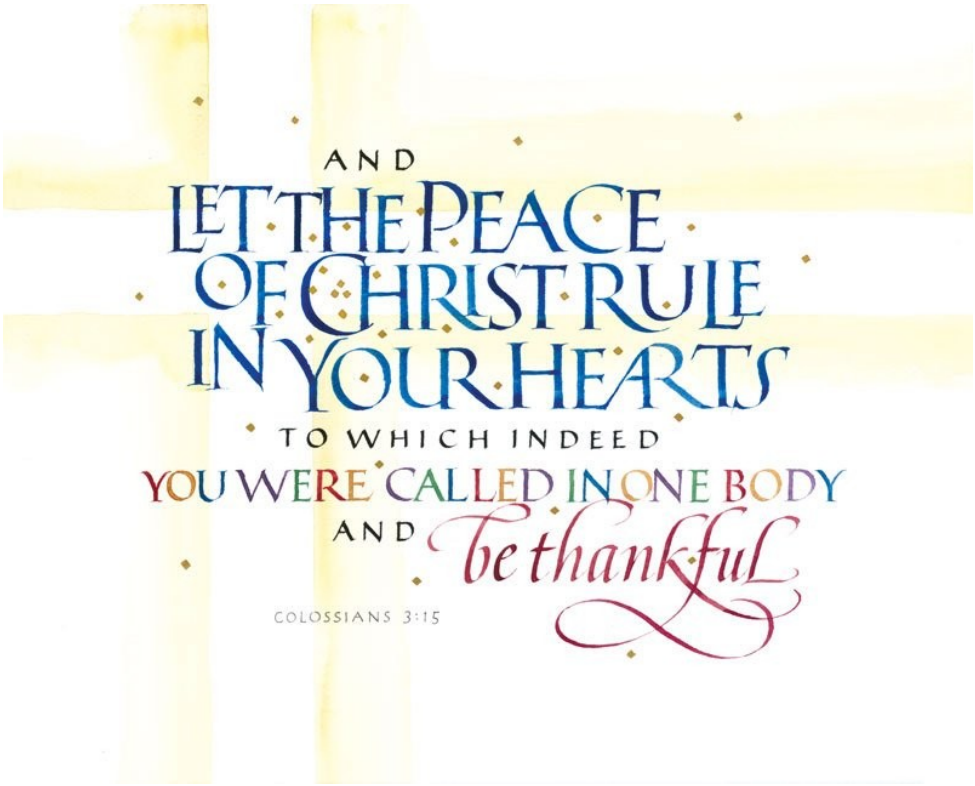
First Paul tells us that we must THINK correctly. From correct thinking come correct attitudes and actions. We are to "set our minds on things above" (verse 2). We are to REMEMBER that we will appear with Him in glory (verse 4). And finally we are to REJECT the ways that we once walked in- the life governed by our selfish and self-seeking attitudes (verses 5-9). We are no longer on the throne- He is!

Our lives are to be characterized by gratitude, peace and love. We are a "chosen people"- we are the children of the King! Our attitudes and actions, presented in a positive way, are listed by the apostle Paul: *"Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. 13 Bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. 14 And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity.*
15 Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace. And be thankful. 16 Let the message of Christ dwell among you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom through psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit, singing to God with gratitude in your hearts. 17 And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him." (Col. 3:12-17)
Paul then lists for us some guidelines for righteous living. Several of these are controversial to the modern reader- particularly the description of submissive wives (verse 18) and obedient slaves (verse 22): *"Wives, submit yourselves to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord. 19 Husbands, love your wives and do not be harsh with them. 20 Children, obey your parents in everything, for this pleases the Lord. 21 Fathers, do not embitter your children, or they will become discouraged. 22 Slaves, obey your earthly masters in everything; and do it, not only when their eye is on you and to curry their favor, but with sincerity of heart and reverence for the Lord. 23 Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for human masters, 24 since you know that you will receive an inheritance from the Lord as a reward. It is the Lord Christ you are serving. 25 Anyone who does wrong will be repaid for their wrongs, and there is no favoritism."* (Col. 3:18-25)

Let's take a closer look at these two verses. Previously we have looked at the proper discipline of children, so I will not rehash that here. Submissive wives does not mean "doormat" wives or in an extreme interpretation "punching bag" wives. If we couple this verse with the one following, we will get a more complete picture of what Paul is saying to the church. If a husband loves his wife (looking at a similar

phrase/instruction from Ephesians *"Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her"* (Eph. 5:25)) and is not "harsh" with her, then most women will respond to the love they are given with love and respect. A wise husband values and treasures the gifts and graces given to his wife. The "sticking point", if there is one, is that sometimes decisions must be made- about childrearing, finances, travel plans, etc. and the two parties do not agree. Paul's instruction suggests that the husband has the "final" say in a decision like this, and the wife is to find a way to graciously support this decision. It's also a wise man who allows his wife to decide some issues like this- the trick is to achieve a loving balance!

Slavery is a despicable institution, and some have "proof texted" the Bible to support their support of this horrible evil. Paul is not advocating for slavery, he is simplys asking those in this institution to respect and care for each other- and that all work is to be "as working for the Lord" (verse 23). Paul is not interested in societal reform here, he is simply accepting what exists in his society and advising Christians to treat each other with respect and to work to please the Lord and not man. The issue as to whether Paul shouls have been a societal "reformer" is another altogether.



https://dwellingintheword.wordpress.com/tag/colossians/

Isaiah 48-49 **October 12, 2014** **Colossians 4**

Many of our problems in our spiritual life occur out of our stuboornness- we simply insist on our own way and refuse to budge from what we are convinced is our best "truth". God's prople Israel had a similar issue, they were referred to by God

Himself as a “stubborn, stiff- necked people” (Exodus 32:9; Deut. 9:6). God tells His people that they are exactly like this, but that he will ‘surprise” tem with new things, things that had never been revealed to them before. Perhaps He was attempting to wake them up into a reality that they could be more flexible in:

“Listen to this, you descendants of Jacob,
you who are called by the name of Israel
and come from the line of Judah,
you who take oaths in the name of the Lord
and invoke the God of Israel—
but not in truth or righteousness—
2 you who call yourselves citizens of the holy city
and claim to rely on the God of Israel—
the Lord Almighty is his name:
3 I foretold the former things long ago,
my mouth announced them and I made them known;
then suddenly I acted, and they came to pass.
4 For I knew how stubborn you were;
your neck muscles were iron,
your forehead was bronze.
5 Therefore I told you these things long ago;
before they happened I announced them to you
so that you could not say,
‘My images brought them about;
my wooden image and metal god ordained them.’
6 You have heard these things; look at them all.
Will you not admit them?
“From now on I will tell you of new things,
of hidden things unknown to you.” (Isiah 48:1-6)

God then tells His people several important things: 1) He is their Teacher and Leader; 2) He holds them responsible for their past disobedience; and 3) He wants them to leave Babylon- and proclaim to all the earth that He is the God who delivered them:

“This is what the Lord says—
your Redeemer, the Holy One of Israel:
“I am the Lord your God,
who teaches you what is best for you,
who directs you in the way you should go.
18 If only you had paid attention to my commands,
your peace would have been like a river,
your well-being like the waves of the sea.
19 Your descendants would have been like the sand,
your children like its numberless grains;
their name would never be blotted out
nor destroyed from before me.”
20 Leave Babylon,
flee from the Babylonians!
Announce this with shouts of joy
and proclaim it.
Send it out to the ends of the earth;

say, “The Lord has redeemed his servant Jacob.”
21 They did not thirst when he led them through the deserts;
he made water flow for them from the rock;
he split the rock
and water gushed out.
22 “There is no peace,” says the Lord, “for the wicked.” (Isaiah 48:17-22)

God reminds Israel that one of the main reasons He chose them to be uniquely His people is so they could be a “light to the Gentiles”. He will not be content until His salvation reaches the very ends of the earth:
“And now the Lord says—
he who formed me in the womb to be his servant
to bring Jacob back to him
and gather Israel to himself,
for I am[b] honored in the eyes of the Lord
and my God has been my strength—
6 he says:
“It is too small a thing for you to be my servant
to restore the tribes of Jacob
and bring back those of Israel I have kept.
I will also make you a light for the Gentiles,
that my salvation may reach to the ends of the earth.” (Isaiah 49:5-6)

Using some of the same imagery as in Isaiah 40, God describes how He will redeem His people, and prepare a unique place for them among the nations:
This is what the Lord says:

“In the time of my favor I will answer you,
and in the day of salvation I will help you;
I will keep you and will make you
to be a covenant for the people,
to restore the land
and to reassign its desolate inheritances,
9 to say to the captives, ‘Come out,’
and to those in darkness, ‘Be free!’
“They will feed beside the roads
and find pasture on every barren hill.
10 They will neither hunger nor thirst,
nor will the desert heat or the sun beat down on them.
He who has compassion on them will guide them
and lead them beside springs of water.
11 I will turn all my mountains into roads,
and my highways will be raised up.” (Isaiah 49:8-11)

The nations of the world will clearly see what God has done for His people- he has exalted them above all nations:
“This is what the Sovereign Lord says:

“See, I will beckon to the nations,
I will lift up my banner to the peoples;

they will bring your sons in their arms
and carry your daughters on their hips.
23 Kings will be your foster fathers,
and their queens your nursing mothers.
They will bow down before you with their faces to the ground;
they will lick the dust at your feet.
Then you will know that I am the Lord;
those who hope in me will not be disappointed." (Isaiah 49:22-23)

Israel's oppressors will be defeated and humbled, for the battle belongs to the Lord (1 Sam. 17:47):
"But this is what the Lord says:

"Yes, captives will be taken from warriors,
and plunder retrieved from the fierce;
I will contend with those who contend with you,
and your children I will save.
26 I will make your oppressors eat their own flesh;
they will be drunk on their own blood, as with wine.
Then all mankind will know
that I, the Lord, am your Savior,
your Redeemer, the Mighty One of Jacob." (Isaiah 49:25-26)

Colossians 4

Paul again mentions slavery, and "assumes" it as part of the cultural landscape, commenting only that all "masters" should be fair in their treatment of slaves since they also have a heavenly "Master" that they are accountable to: *"Masters, provide your slaves with what is right and fair, because you know that you also have a Master in heaven."* (Col. 4:1)

We are commanded to "pray"- not only for ourselves or for our times of devotion, reflection and meditation but also for others. Prayer is certainly the Christian's most underused weapon against the enemy. By interceding for others, and by finding ourselves as part of the answers we receive, we are blessed and strengthened in the faith and drawn into greaer intimacy with God*:."Devote yourselves to prayer, being watchful and thankful. 3 And pray for us, too, that God may open a door for our message, so that we may proclaim the mystery of Christ, for which I am in chains. 4 Pray that I may proclaim it clearly, as I should. 5 Be wise in the way you act toward outsiders; make the most of every opportunity. 6 Let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to answer everyone."* (Col. 4:2-6)

Final greetings are given as Paul closes this pastoral letter. As always he is gracious and thankful for the good works and faithful servants in the churches he ministered to. Paul also reminds them that he is "in chains", ministering to them from afar from prison. We should always remember the love and sacrifice of so many that make our spiritual lives and Christian fellowship possible: *"Tychicus will tell you all the news about me. He is a dear brother, a faithful minister and fellow servant[a] in the*

Lord. 8 I am sending him to you for the express purpose that you may know about our[b] circumstances and that he may encourage your hearts. 9 He is coming with Onesimus, our faithful and dear brother, who is one of you. They will tell you everything that is happening here. 10 My fellow prisoner Aristarchus sends you his greetings, as does Mark, the cousin of Barnabas. (You have received instructions about him; if he comes to you, welcome him.) 11 Jesus, who is called Justus, also sends greetings. These are the only Jews[c] among my co-workers for the kingdom of God, and they have proved a comfort to me. 12 Epaphras, who is one of you and a servant of Christ Jesus, sends greetings. He is always wrestling in prayer for you, that you may stand firm in all the will of God, mature and fully assured. 13 I vouch for him that he is working hard for you and for those at Laodicea and Hierapolis. 14 Our dear friend Luke, the doctor, and Demas send greetings. 15 Give my greetings to the brothers and sisters at Laodicea, and to Nympha and the church in her house. 16 After this letter has been read to you, see that it is also read in the church of the Laodiceans and that you in turn read the letter from Laodicea. 17 Tell Archippus: "See to it that you complete the ministry you have received in the Lord." 18 I, Paul, write this greeting in my own hand. Remember my chains. Grace be with you." (Col. 4:7-18)

Isaiah 50-52 October 13, 2014 1 Thessalonians 1

God carefull and deliberately reveals His disappointment, sadness and even anger with His errant children. Why did they leave His care? Why did they wander away from the care and protection of their Father? God says to Isaiah:

This is what the Lord says:
"Where is your mother's certificate of divorce
with which I sent her away?
Or to which of my creditors
did I sell you?
Because of your sins you were sold;
because of your transgressions your mother was sent away.
2 When I came, why was there no one?
When I called, why was there no one to answer?
Was my arm too short to deliver you?
Do I lack the strength to rescue you?
By a mere rebuke I dry up the sea,
I turn rivers into a desert;
their fish rot for lack of water
and die of thirst.
3 I clothe the heavens with darkness
and make sackcloth its covering." (Isaiah 50:1-3)

We then encounter another of the many Messianic prophecies in Isaiah, this one a description of the unwarranted abuse that Jesus received at the hands of His accusers. The language is descriptive of the Servant, who could have been both a relative contemporary of Isaiahs as well as Jesus many years later:

"The Sovereign Lord has opened my ears;

I have not been rebellious,
I have not turned away.
6 I offered my back to those who beat me,
my cheeks to those who pulled out my beard;
I did not hide my face
from mocking and spitting.
7 Because the Sovereign Lord helps me,
I will not be disgraced.
Therefore have I set my face like flint,
and I know I will not be put to shame.
8 He who vindicates me is near.
Who then will bring charges against me?
Let us face each other!
Who is my accuser?
Let him confront me!
9 It is the Sovereign Lord who helps me.
Who will condemn me?
They will all wear out like a garment;
the moths will eat them up.
10 Who among you fears the Lord
and obeys the word of his servant?
Let the one who walks in the dark,
who has no light,
trust in the name of the Lord
and rely on their God." (Isaiah 50:5-10)

God always and faithfully promises a close and intimate loving relationship with those who truly love Him- He is the source of their salvation, both temporal and eternal:

"Listen to me, you who pursue righteousness
and who seek the Lord:
Look to the rock from which you were cut
and to the quarry from which you were hewn;
2 look to Abraham, your father,
and to Sarah, who gave you birth.
When I called him he was only one man,
and I blessed him and made him many.
3 The Lord will surely comfort Zion
and will look with compassion on all her ruins;
he will make her deserts like Eden,
her wastelands like the garden of the Lord.
Joy and gladness will be found in her,
thanksgiving and the sound of singing.
4 "Listen to me, my people;
hear me, my nation:
Instruction will go out from me;
my justice will become a light to the nations.
5 My righteousness draws near speedily,
my salvation is on the way,
and my arm will bring justice to the nations.

The islands will look to me
and wait in hope for my arm.
6 Lift up your eyes to the heavens,
look at the earth beneath;
the heavens will vanish like smoke,
the earth will wear out like a garment
and its inhabitants die like flies.
But my salvation will last forever,
my righteousness will never fail." (Isaiah 51:1-6).

God's salvation- true salvation- will never fail! We have this on His word. God will provide wonderful things for His children- they need only to call His Name and be blessed- He will never leave or forsake them:
"Awake, awake, arm of the LORD,
clothe yourself with strength!
Awake, as in days gone by,
as in generations of old.
Was it not you who cut Rahab to pieces,
who pierced that monster through?
10 Was it not you who dried up the sea,
the waters of the great deep,
who made a road in the depths of the sea
so that the redeemed might cross over?
11 Those the LORD has rescued will return.
They will enter Zion with singing;
everlasting joy will crown their heads.
Gladness and joy will overtake them,
and sorrow and sighing will flee away.
12 "I, even I, am he who comforts you.
Who are you that you fear mere mortals,
human beings who are but grass,
13 that you forget the LORD your Maker,
who stretches out the heavens
and who lays the foundations of the earth,
that you live in constant terror every day
because of the wrath of the oppressor,
who is bent on destruction?
For where is the wrath of the oppressor?
14 The cowering prisoners will soon be set free;
they will not die in their dungeon,
nor will they lack bread." (Isaiah 51:9-14)

For those who disobey the sovereign God, there is only wrath, rebuke and punishment:
"Awake, awake!
Rise up, Jerusalem,
you who have drunk from the hand of the Lord
the cup of his wrath,
you who have drained to its dregs
the goblet that makes people stagger.

18 Among all the children she bore
there was none to guide her;
among all the children she reared
there was none to take her by the hand.
19 These double calamities have come upon you—
who can comfort you?—
ruin and destruction, famine and sword—
who can[a] console you?
20 Your children have fainted;
they lie at every street corner,
like antelope caught in a net.
They are filled with the wrath of the Lord,
with the rebuke of your God.” (Isaiah 51:17-20)

God pleads for His childrre to “awake”- to come out of the spiritual sleep that has hindered their full enjoyment of their God, and return to their Father, Defender and Protector. It is His Name and His hand that will save them and give them joy:
“Awake, awake, Zion,
clothe yourself with strength!
Put on your garments of splendor,
Jerusalem, the holy city.
The uncircumcised and defiled
will not enter you again.
2 Shake off your dust;
rise up, sit enthroned, Jerusalem.
Free yourself from the chains on your neck,
Daughter Zion, now a captive.
3 For this is what the Lord says:

“You were sold for nothing,
and without money you will be redeemed.”
4 For this is what the Sovereign Lord says:

“At first my people went down to Egypt to live;
lately, Assyria has oppressed them.
5 “And now what do I have here?” declares the Lord.

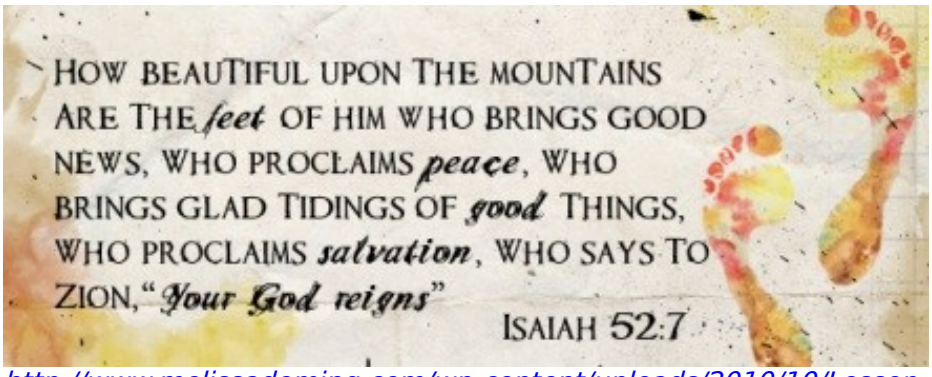
“For my people have been taken away for nothing,
and those who rule them mock,[b]”
declares the Lord.
“And all day long
my name is constantly blasphemed.
6 Therefore my people will know my name;
therefore in that day they will know
that it is I who foretold it.
Yes, it is I.”
7 How beautiful on the mountains
are the feet of those who bring good news,
who proclaim peace,
who bring good tidings,

who proclaim salvation,
who say to Zion,
"Your God reigns!" (Isaiah 52:1-7).
How beautiful indeed are the feet of those who bring good tidings! This verse has been set to music in a modern setting
How lovely on the mountains are the feet of Him
Who brings good news, good news;
Announcing peace, proclaiming news of happiness:
Our God reigns, our God reigns!

Refrain

Our God reigns!
Our God reigns!
Our God reigns!
Our God reigns! (Our God Reigns - Words & Music: Leonard E. Smith, 1974; arranged by Thomas E. Fettke & Stephen Beddia)

We see still another Messianic prophecy- the Servant who is described here is to undergo the same rejection and suffering that Jeus did- once again a "short term" interpretation of a servant in Isaiah's time as well as an astonishingly accurate portrayal of the passion of our Lord Jesus.
"See, my servant will act wisely;
he will be raised and lifted up and highly exalted.
14 Just as there were many who were appalled at him—
his appearance was so disfigured beyond that of any human being
and his form marred beyond human likeness—
15 so he will sprinkle many nations,
and kings will shut their mouths because of him.
For what they were not told, they will see,
and what they have not heard, they will understand." (Isaiah 52:13-15)



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1 Thessalonians 1

It's not just the US Olympic basketball team that is the "Dream Team"- the apostolic equivalent to this was the team of Paul, Silas and Timothy. Al three of these gifted and Spirit filled men ministered with power and effectiveness to the church in Thesolinica. We are told that this church was a "baby" church – the enemy here

was predominantl in the form of false teachers: “Paul wrote his first letter to the Thessalonian church from the city of Corinth around AD 51, just a few months after having preached in Thessalonica on his second missionary journey. Upon leaving Thessalonica under duress, Paul, Silas, and Timothy traveled to Athens by way of Berea. But after a short time in Athens, Paul felt the need to receive a report from the newborn church in Thessalonica, so he sent Timothy back to serve and minister to the new believers there. Paul wanted to check on the state of the Thessalonians’ faith, for fear that false teachers might have infiltrated their number. However, Timothy soon returned with a good report, prompting Paul to pen 1 Thessalonians as a letter of encouragement to the new believers.” (http://www.insight.org/resources/bible/first-thessalonians.html)

The first words of the letter are a greeting from these three: *“Paul, Silas[a] and Timothy,*
To the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ:Grace and peace to you.” (1 Thess. 1:1)

The “team” then expresses thanks for the faith, power and good works that are exemplary of this young church: *“We always thank God for all of you and continually mention you in our prayers. 3 We remember before our God and Father your work produced by faith, your labor prompted by love, and your endurance inspired by hope in our Lord Jesus Christ. 4 For we know, brothers and sisters[b] loved by God, that he has chosen you, 5 because our gospel came to you not simply with words but also with power, with the Holy Spirit and deep conviction. You know how we lived among you for your sake.”* (1 Thess. 1:2-5)

One of the most wonderftul things that can be said about any body of believers is that their testimony was so clear, and their love of God so obvious, that many noticed it! This is the case here. Paul reflects on the clear and winning testimony that this young church has created, and the fact that many have taken note of it. Their testimony, like all good testimony, points to the Lord Himself: *“For we know, brothers and sisters loved by God, that he has chosen you, 5 because our gospel came to you not simply with words but also with power, with the Holy Spirit and deep conviction. You know how we lived among you for your sake. You became imitators of us and of the Lord, for you welcomed the message in the midst of severe suffering with the joy given by the Holy Spirit. 7 And so you became a model to all the believers in Macedonia and Achaia. 8 The Lord’s message rang out from you not only in Macedonia and Achaia—your faith in God has become known everywhere. Therefore we do not need to say anything about it, 9 for they themselves report what kind of reception you gave us. They tell how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God, 10 and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead—Jesus, who rescues us from the coming wrath.”* (1 Thess. 1:4-10)

Isaiah 53-55 October 14, 2014 1 Thessalonians 2

Jesus in the Old Testament? Salvation by faith in the Messiah? Yes! All of us are saved exactly the same way- by faith in the same Savior- either the one to come later in history, ot the Jesus of history who has come. In Isaiah 53 we see one of the clearest prophecies of the Messiah- the description of the suffering Servant. Many

have been blessed by this portrait, and many who have come to faith- likely including Paul after his conversion- have meditated and pondered this chapter to gain understanding of the true purpose of Jesus' life and ministry- to fulfil completely and "once for all" this purpose- to do what we could never do for ourselves!

"Who has believed our message
and to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed?
2 He grew up before him like a tender shoot,
and like a root out of dry ground.
He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him,
nothing in his appearance that we should desire him.
3 He was despised and rejected by mankind,
a man of suffering, and familiar with pain.
Like one from whom people hide their faces
he was despised, and we held him in low esteem." (Isaiah 53:1-3)

Certainly this does not mean that "women screamed and children cried" whrn Jesus made an appearance. What I believe this passage means is that Jesus was not a "handsome and comely" man- He was probably "ordinary" in appearance. Verty few who encountered Him would remember that- they would remember His amazing compassion, His blinding insight, His authoritative teaching, or His challenges to be part of the Kingdom of God.

He bore our sin…the sin of all of us "sheep" who could not or would not live lives of righteousness because of the deep problem of a sin nature within us:

"Surely he took up our pain
and bore our suffering,
yet we considered him punished by God,
stricken by him, and afflicted.
5 But he was pierced for our transgressions,
he was crushed for our iniquities;
the punishment that brought us peace was on him,
and by his wounds we are healed.
6 We all, like sheep, have gone astray,
each of us has turned to our own way;
and the Lord has laid on him
the iniquity of us all." (Isaiah 53:4-6)

With astonishing (but not surprising) accuracy the prophet continues the prophecy- this section giving details and dark hints about the manner that Jesus was unjustly tried, was silent before His accusers, executed and buried in a grave that was provided by a friend:

"He was oppressed and afflicted,
yet he did not open his mouth;
he was led like a lamb to the slaughter,
and as a sheep before its shearers is silent,
so he did not open his mouth.
8 By oppression[a] and judgment he was taken away.
Yet who of his generation protested?
For he was cut off from the land of the living;
for the transgression of my people he was punished.[b]

9 He was assigned a grave with the wicked,
and with the rich in his death,
though he had done no violence,
nor was any deceit in his mouth." (Isaiah 53:7-9)

It was God's ultimate plan for the Son to suffer and bear our sin, and God rewarded the Son with a place of honor, from which he could see- and ultimately judge- the nations. The place was (and is) the very right hand of the Father – the seat of honor. And Jesus continues to intercede for us all:
"Yet it was the Lord's will to crush him and cause him to suffer,
and though the Lord makes[c] his life an offering for sin,
he will see his offspring and prolong his days,
and the will of the Lord will prosper in his hand.
11 After he has suffered,
he will see the light of life[d] and be satisfied[e];
by his knowledge[f] my righteous servant will justify many,
and he will bear their iniquities.
12 Therefore I will give him a portion among the great,[g]
and he will divide the spoils with the strong,[h]
because he poured out his life unto death,
and was numbered with the transgressors.
For he bore the sin of many,
and made intercession for the transgressors." (Isaiah 53:10-12)

At a time in history when Isareal needed encouragement, we find this expansive prophecy in Isaiah that promises that God's people will always have a "place in the sun". The image of a barren woman giving joyful praise is a powerful one. In that day barrenness was thought to be a sign of abandonment by God, or punishment for some sin. She cries out with joy because her greatest purpose has been fulfilled:
"Sing, barren woman,
you who never bore a child;
burst into song, shout for joy,
you who were never in labor;
because more are the children of the desolate woman
than of her who has a husband,"
says the Lord.
2 "Enlarge the place of your tent,
stretch your tent curtains wide,
do not hold back;
lengthen your cords,
strengthen your stakes.
3 For you will spread out to the right and to the left;
your descendants will dispossess nations
and settle in their desolate cities." (Isaiah 54:1-3)

Not only will those who are enemies fail to conquer, God promises, but you and your children will have true peace as the Lord Himself will teachHis ways to the prople:
"All your children will be taught by the Lord,
and great will be their peace.
14 In righteousness you will be established:

Tyranny will be far from you;
you will have nothing to fear.
Terror will be far removed;
it will not come near you.
15 If anyone does attack you, it will not be my doing;
whoever attacks you will surrender to you.
16 “See, it is I who created the blacksmith
who fans the coals into flame
and forges a weapon fit for its work.
And it is I who have created the destroyer to wreak havoc;
17 no weapon forged against you will prevail,
and you will refute every tongue that accuses you.
This is the heritage of the servants of the Lord,
and this is their vindication from me,”
declares the Lord.” (Isaiah 54:13-17)
One of the several commentaruies on this chapter I have found helpful is listed here: http://biblehub.com/commentaries/guzik/commentaries/2354.htm.

One of the many reasons I receive constant delight from Isaiah is exemplified in this next chapter. The richness of the imagery, the boldness and clarity of the promises of the provisions of God, and the wonder of the poetry itself are truly matchless. The first portion of this delightful meal is below:
“Come, all you who are thirsty,
come to the waters;
and you who have no money,
come, buy and eat!
Come, buy wine and milk
without money and without cost.
2 Why spend money on what is not bread,
and your labor on what does not satisfy?
Listen, listen to me, and eat what is good,
and you will delight in the richest of fare.
3 Give ear and come to me;
listen, that you may live.
I will make an everlasting covenant with you,
my faithful love promised to David.
4 See, I have made him a witness to the peoples,
a ruler and commander of the peoples.
5 Surely you will summon nations you know not,
and nations you do not know will come running to you,
because of the Lord your God,
the Holy One of Israel,
for he has endowed you with splendor.”
6 Seek the Lord while he may be found;
call on him while he is near.
7 Let the wicked forsake their ways
and the unrighteous their thoughts.
Let them turn to the Lord, and he will have mercy on them,
and to our God, for he will freely pardon.” (Isaiah 55:1-7)

Are you thirsty? Are you burdened and in need of pardon? Are you tired of your sin? Then “seek the Lord while He may be found”! (Verse 6). For God will forgive and pardon you, and satisfy your very soul- not with bread that does not satisfy but with the Bread of Life (verse 2). And “listen that you may live” (verse 3)- for “faith comes by hearing” (Romans 10:17)!

God carefully and lovingly explains that we are made in His image, not He in ours. His “ways” are different from ours, and much of our confusion comes from misinterpreting His will for us. Things that “don’t make sense’ to us are perfectly reasonable to Him- He alone has all the information, all the insight, and all the wisdom necessary to see the “true picture”. We, like Paul, often only see “puzzling reflections in a mirror” (1 Cor. 13:12 NLT). God tells us:

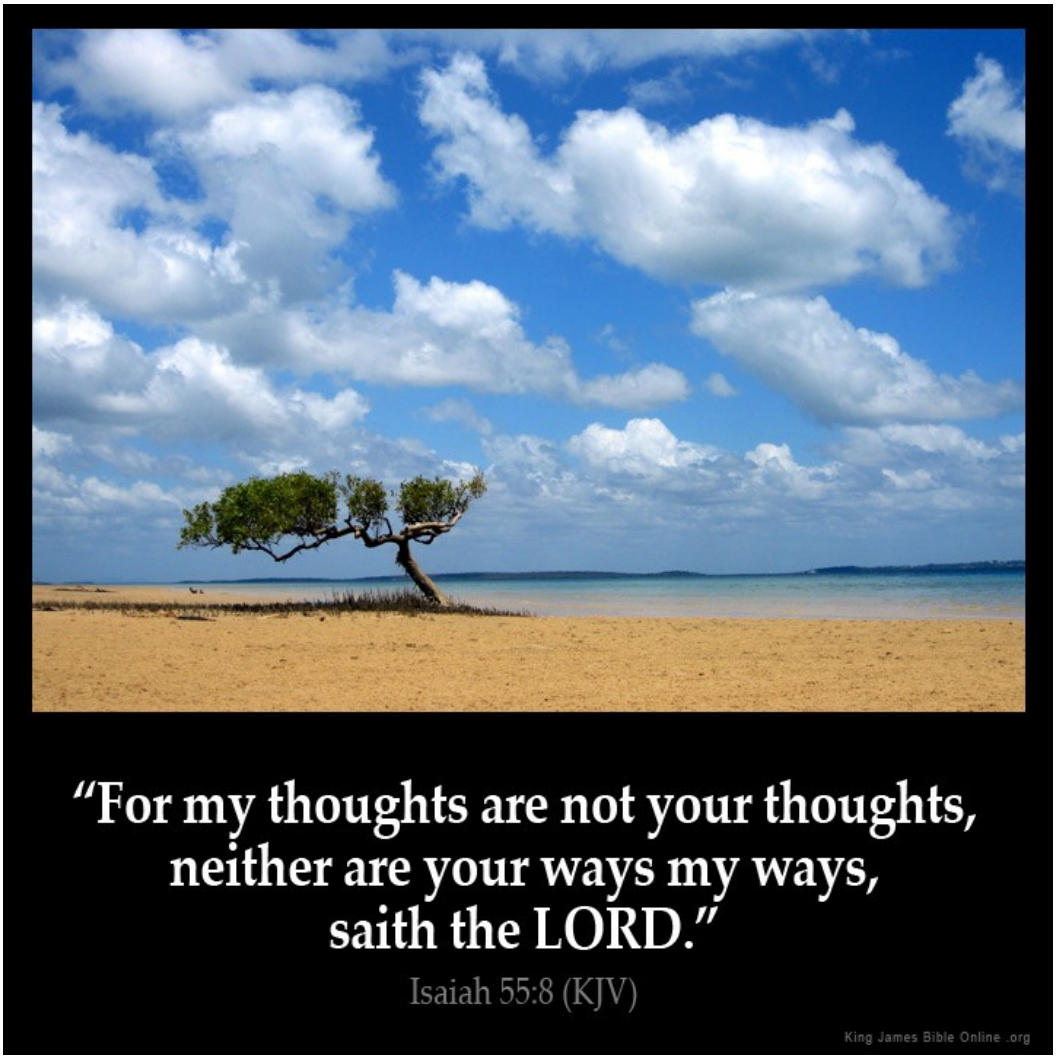
“For my thoughts are not your thoughts,
neither are your ways my ways,”
declares the Lord.
9 “As the heavens are higher than the earth,
so are my ways higher than your ways
and my thoughts than your thoughts.
10 As the rain and the snow
come down from heaven,
and do not return to it
without watering the earth
and making it bud and flourish,
so that it yields seed for the sower and bread for the eater,
11 so is my word that goes out from my mouth:
It will not return to me empty,
but will accomplish what I desire
and achieve the purpose for which I sent it.” (Isaiah 55:9-11)

The last verse is so important to us who are eager to make God’s Word heard, read or listened to throughout the earth. We have the promise from God Himself that His Word “will not return to me empty”. Our part is to faithfully and winningly share the truth from God- He will provide the increase!

In the beautiful conclusion to this part of Isaiah’s prophecy we see the image of a joyful people going forth in gladness, and the very earth itself bearing testimony to the One True God:

“You will go out in joy
and be led forth in peace;
the mountains and hills
will burst into song before you,
and all the trees of the field
will clap their hands.
13 Instead of the thornbush will grow the juniper,
and instead of briers the myrtle will grow.
This will be for the Lord’s renown,
for an everlasting sign,
that will endure forever.” (Isaiah 55:12-13).

True joy and peace are found only in Him!



http://www.kingjamesbibleonline.org/Isaiah-55-8_Inspirational_Image/

1 Thessalonians 2

One of the sad realities of evangelism is that there is almost always opposition to the preaching and sharing of the Word. We are battling a defeated enemy, but he is intelligent and fully aware of the weaknesses not only of ourselves trying to share but those with whom we have contact. Paul experienced opposition in his ministry at every turn, but faced improisonment, beatings, death threats and plots with a resolute will to "share anyway". He attests to this in the first part of this chapter of his letter to the church in Thessalonica: *"You know, brothers and sisters, that our visit to you was not without results. 2 We had previously suffered and been treated outrageously in Philippi, as you know, but with the help of our God we dared to tell you his gospel in the face of strong opposition. 3 For the appeal we make does not spring from error or impure motives, nor are we trying to trick you. 4 On the contrary, we speak as those approved by God to be entrusted with the gospel. We are not trying to please people but God, who tests our hearts. 5 You know we never used flattery, nor did we put on a mask to cover up greed—God is our witness. 6 We were not looking for praise from people, not from you or anyone else, even though as apostles of Christ we could have asserted our authority. 7 Instead, we were like*

young children among you. Just as a nursing mother cares for her children, 8 so we cared for you. Because we loved you so much, we were delighted to share with you not only the gospel of God but our lives as well." (1 Thess 2:1-8). I believe the "sectret" to Paul's success was his focus on "pleasing God" (verse 4) He simplys ahred and loved the people he was in misitry with, and the testimony that resulted was powerful and convincing. Its' sort of like the wall hangiging that a friend of mine at CDC had- "The MAIN thing is to keep the MAIN THING the MAIN THING!" Paul's main thing was sharing his testimony in a loving way that pointed his listeners to God and His wonderful Son!

Do you remember what Isaiah 55:11 says (previous section)? God promised that EVERY "*word that goes out from my mouth:*
It will not return to me empty,
but will accomplish what I desire
and achieve the purpose for which I sent it." (Isaiah 55:11 NIV).
The truth of this is evident in Paul's testimony here- he recounts the success that he and his coworkers have had because the "word" they shared was recognized as "from God" and not simly "from men". The Word that was shared had both power and authority: *"And we also thank God continually because, when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as a human word, but as it actually is, the word of God, which is indeed at work in you who believe. 14 For you, brothers and sisters, became imitators of God's churches in Judea, which are in Christ Jesus: You suffered from your own people the same things those churches suffered from the Jews 15 who killed the Lord Jesus and the prophets and also drove us out. They displease God and are hostile to everyone 16 in their effort to keep us from speaking to the Gentiles so that they may be saved. In this way they always heap up their sins to the limit. The wrath of God has come upon them at last."* (1 Thess 2:13-16)

Paul then expresses his sadness at being separated from his "true family"- the church- in very touching and caring words. He truly loved those he ministered to: *"But, brothers and sisters, when we were orphaned by being separated from you for a short time (in person, not in thought), out of our intense longing we made every effort to see you. 18 For we wanted to come to you—certainly I, Paul, did, again and again—but Satan blocked our way. 19 For what is our hope, our joy, or the crown in which we will glory in the presence of our Lord Jesus when he comes? Is it not you? 20 Indeed, you are our glory and joy."* (1 Thess 2:17-20)

Isaiah 56-58 October 15, 2014 1 Thessalonians 3

Salvation has not come only for the Jews, God graciously extends His salvation to all. We have seen this already in the breakthrough revelations in Acts, where Paul – and other- realized that God was interested in the salvation of all of His human family:
"This is what the Lord says:

"Maintain justice
and do what is right,
for my salvation is close at hand
and my righteousness will soon be revealed.

2 Blessed is the one who does this—
the person who holds it fast,
who keeps the Sabbath without desecrating it,
and keeps their hands from doing any evil.”
3 Let no foreigner who is bound to the Lord say,
“The Lord will surely exclude me from his people.”
And let no eunuch complain,
“I am only a dry tree.”
4 For this is what the Lord says:

“To the eunuchs who keep my Sabbaths,
who choose what pleases me
and hold fast to my covenant—
5 to them I will give within my temple and its walls
a memorial and a name
better than sons and daughters;
I will give them an everlasting name
that will endure forever.
6 And foreigners who bind themselves to the Lord
to minister to him,
to love the name of the Lord,
and to be his servants,
all who keep the Sabbath without desecrating it
and who hold fast to my covenant—
7 these I will bring to my holy mountain
and give them joy in my house of prayer.
Their burnt offerings and sacrifices
will be accepted on my altar;
for my house will be called
a house of prayer for all nations.”
8 The Sovereign Lord declares—
he who gathers the exiles of Israel:
“I will gather still others to them
besides those already gathered.” (Isaiah 56:1-8)

There are always the wicked- who “love to sleep” and are constantly indulging themselves, God condemns them for their sloth and spiritual deadness:

“Come, all you beasts of the field,
come and devour, all you beasts of the forest!
10 Israel’s watchmen are blind,
they all lack knowledge;
they are all mute dogs,
they cannot bark;
they lie around and dream,
they love to sleep.
11 They are dogs with mighty appetites;
they never have enough.
They are shepherds who lack understanding;
they all turn to their own way,
they seek their own gain.
12 “Come,” each one cries, “let me get wine!

Let us drink our fill of beer!
And tomorrow will be like today,
or even far better." (Isaiah 56:9-12)

God looks with anger and judgment on those who "mock the wicked" and whose lives are consumed with lust and despicable behavior. These who are wicked moick the righteous, drawing God's anger and condemnation:
"The righteous perish,
and no one takes it to heart;
the devout are taken away,
and no one understands
that the righteous are taken away
to be spared from evil.
2 Those who walk uprightly
enter into peace;
they find rest as they lie in death.
3 "But you—come here, you children of a sorceress,
you offspring of adulterers and prostitutes!
4 Who are you mocking?
At whom do you sneer
and stick out your tongue?
Are you not a brood of rebels,
the offspring of liars?
5 You burn with lust among the oaks
and under every spreading tree;
you sacrifice your children in the ravines
and under the overhanging crags.
6 The idols among the smooth stones of the ravines are your portion;
indeed, they are your lot.
Yes, to them you have poured out drink offerings
and offered grain offerings.
In view of all this, should I relent?
7 You have made your bed on a high and lofty hill;
there you went up to offer your sacrifices.
8 Behind your doors and your doorposts
you have put your pagan symbols.
Forsaking me, you uncovered your bed,
you climbed into it and opened it wide;
you made a pact with those whose beds you love,
and you looked with lust on their naked bodies." (Isaiah 57:1-8)

God sees all, and has not forgotten His faithful people- he will reward them either now or later in His perfect presence. There is true peace for the righteous, but not for the wicked:
14 And it will be said:

"Build up, build up, prepare the road!

Remove the obstacles out of the way of my people."
15 For this is what the high and exalted One says—
he who lives forever, whose name is holy:
"I live in a high and holy place,
but also with the one who is contrite and lowly in spirit,
to revive the spirit of the lowly
and to revive the heart of the contrite.
16 I will not accuse them forever,
nor will I always be angry,
for then they would faint away because of me—
the very people I have created.
17 I was enraged by their sinful greed;
I punished them, and hid my face in anger,
yet they kept on in their willful ways.
18 I have seen their ways, but I will heal them;
I will guide them and restore comfort to Israel's mourners,
19 creating praise on their lips.
Peace, peace, to those far and near,"
says the Lord. "And I will heal them."
20 But the wicked are like the tossing sea,
which cannot rest,
whose waves cast up mire and mud.
21 "There is no peace," says my God, "for the wicked." (Isaiah 57:14-21)

Once again God reminds His people that empty religion, the religion of the lips but not of the heart. Does not please Him. He points to the hypocrisy of theose who fast and still exploit their workers. True fasting, God explains, involves the heart-doing justice and truly loving one's neighbors:
"Shout it aloud, do not hold back.
Raise your voice like a trumpet.
Declare to my people their rebellion
and to the descendants of Jacob their sins.
2 For day after day they seek me out;
they seem eager to know my ways,
as if they were a nation that does what is right
and has not forsaken the commands of its God.
They ask me for just decisions
and seem eager for God to come near them.
3 'Why have we fasted,' they say,
'and you have not seen it?
Why have we humbled ourselves,
and you have not noticed?'
"Yet on the day of your fasting, you do as you please
and exploit all your workers." (Isaiah 58:1-3)

God patiently explains what he means by "true fasting", so that the people will understand. IT is the heart that God wants to claim and change, not our outward behaviors:
"Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen:
to loose the chains of injustice

and untie the cords of the yoke,
to set the oppressed free
and break every yoke?
7 Is it not to share your food with the hungry
and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter—
when you see the naked, to clothe them,
and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood?
8 Then your light will break forth like the dawn,
and your healing will quickly appear;
then your righteousness[c] will go before you,
and the glory of the Lord will be your rear guard.
9 Then you will call, and the Lord will answer;
you will cry for help, and he will say: Here am I.
“If you do away with the yoke of oppression,
with the pointing finger and malicious talk,
10 and if you spend yourselves in behalf of the hungry
and satisfy the needs of the oppressed,
then your light will rise in the darkness,
and your night will become like the noonday.” (Isaiah 58:6-10)

1 Thessalonians 3

Paul is separated from the church at Thessalonica by geography but not by “spirit”. His hart goes out to them in their needs. He is being persecuted and is “in chains”, yet his love and concern goes out to the church. Finally he decides to senf Timothy- part of his team- to the church to determine ther spiritual and emotional stae, for he fears that all the work he do with and for them might be “in vain” (verse 4*): “So when we could stand it no longer, we thought it best to be left by ourselves in Athens. 2 We sent Timothy, who is our brother and co-worker in God’s service in spreading the gospel of Christ, to strengthen and encourage you in your faith, 3 so that no one would be unsettled by these trials. For you know quite well that we are destined for them. 4 In fact, when we were with you, we kept telling you that we would be persecuted. And it turned out that way, as you well know. 5 For this reason, when I could stand it no longer, I sent to find out about your faith. I was afraid that in some way the tempter had tempted you and that our labors might have been in vain.”* (1 Thess. 3:1-5)

Timothy, however, has an encouraging report. Despite the physical distance between Paul and the church, and despite the fact that Paul is not free to visit them, the Spirit of the Lord has been working among them, and they have stayed faithful: *“But Timothy has just now come to us from you and has brought good news about your faith and love. He has told us that you always have pleasant memories of us and that you long to see us, just as we also long to see you. 7 Therefore, brothers and sisters, in all our distress and persecution we were encouraged about you because of your faith. 8 For now we really live, since you are standing firm in the Lord. 9 How can we thank God enough for you in return for all the joy we have in the presence of our God because of you? 10 Night and day we pray most earnestly that we may see you again and supply what is lacking in your faith. 11 Now may our God and Father himself and our Lord Jesus clear the way for us to come to you. 12 May*

the Lord make your love increase and overflow for each other and for everyone else, just as ours does for you. 13 May he strengthen your hearts so that you will be blameless and holy in the presence of our God and Father when our Lord Jesus comes with all his holy ones." (1 Thess. 3:6-13)

Paul is greatly encouraged by the faith of these brothers and sisters in the Lord, and he prays that God will continue to bless and strengthen them. What wonderful confidence there is in one whose faith has been tried repeatedly and has discovered the faithfulness of God!

http://christinesbiblestudy.wordpress.com/2013/10/02/1-thessalonians-3-afflictions-and-tribulation-2/

Isaiah 59-61 October 16, 2014 1 Thessalonians 4

The fundamental problem that mankind faces is not global hunfger, warfare or even "global warming" which is now called "climate change"-it is the sin nature of all of us. The sins we commit are not really the issue- it is the nature of mankind to starya, to be selfish, to go their own way that is the crux of our problems. God tells Isaiah that this is the problem with His people- their innate desiure to be "like the most high" (Isaiah 14:13-14):

"Surely the arm of the Lord is not too short to save,
nor his ear too dull to hear.
2 But your iniquities have separated
you from your God;
your sins have hidden his face from you,

so that he will not hear.
3 For your hands are stained with blood,
your fingers with guilt.
Your lips have spoken falsely,
and your tongue mutters wicked things.
4 No one calls for justice;
no one pleads a case with integrity.
They rely on empty arguments, they utter lies;
they conceive trouble and give birth to evil." (Isaiah 59:1-4)

The consequence of all this is separation from God- separation from righteousness, truth and justice, darkness instead of light, terror instead of joy:
"So justice is far from us,
and righteousness does not reach us.
We look for light, but all is darkness;
for brightness, but we walk in deep shadows.
10 Like the blind we grope along the wall,
feeling our way like people without eyes.
At midday we stumble as if it were twilight;
among the strong, we are like the dead.
11 We all growl like bears;
we moan mournfully like doves.
We look for justice, but find none;
for deliverance, but it is far away.
12 For our offenses are many in your sight,
and our sins testify against us.
Our offenses are ever with us,
and we acknowledge our iniquities:
13 rebellion and treachery against the Lord,
turning our backs on our God,
inciting revolt and oppression,
uttering lies our hearts have conceived.
14 So justice is driven back,
and righteousness stands at a distance;
truth has stumbled in the streets,
honesty cannot enter.
15 Truth is nowhere to be found,
and whoever shuns evil becomes a prey." (Isaiah 59:9-15)
So God did what we could not do for ourselves- he became our salvation and put His Spirit in us, and saved us from ourselves:

"He saw that there was no one,
he was appalled that there was no one to intervene;
so his own arm achieved salvation for him,
and his own righteousness sustained him.
17 He put on righteousness as his breastplate,
and the helmet of salvation on his head;
he put on the garments of vengeance
and wrapped himself in zeal as in a cloak.

18 According to what they have done,
so will he repay
wrath to his enemies
and retribution to his foes;
he will repay the islands their due.
19 From the west, people will fear the name of the Lord,
and from the rising of the sun, they will revere his glory.
For he will come like a pent-up flood
that the breath of the Lord drives along.[a]
20 “The Redeemer will come to Zion,
to those in Jacob who repent of their sins,”
declares the Lord.
21 “As for me, this is my covenant with them,” says the Lord. “My Spirit, who is on you, will not depart from you, and my words that I have put in your mouth will always be on your lips, on the lips of your children and on the lips of their descendants—from this time on and forever,” says the Lord.” (Isaiah 69:16-21).

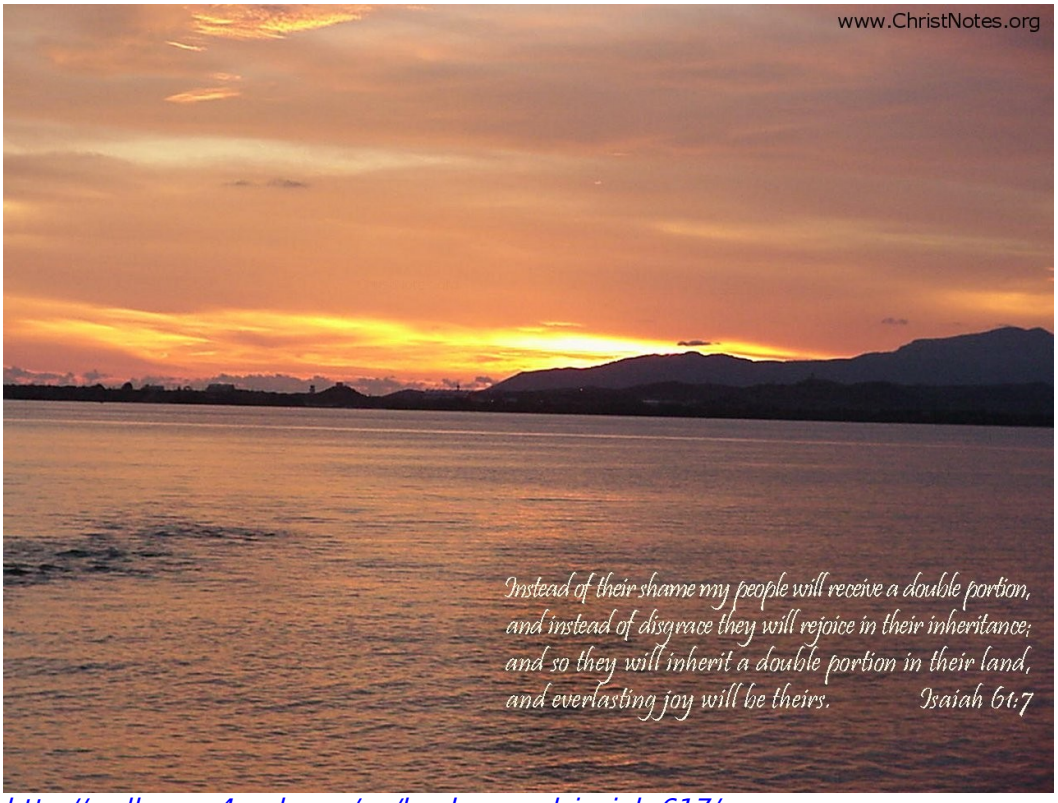
The redeemed Israel will be full of light, and will fulfil her destiny to be a blessing and a “light to the nations”(Isaiah 49:6):
“Arise, shine, for your light has come,
and the glory of the Lord rises upon you.
2 See, darkness covers the earth
and thick darkness is over the peoples,
but the Lord rises upon you
and his glory appears over you.
3 Nations will come to your light,
and kings to the brightness of your dawn.
4 “Lift up your eyes and look about you:
All assemble and come to you;
your sons come from afar,
and your daughters are carried on the hip.
5 Then you will look and be radiant,
your heart will throb and swell with joy;
the wealth on the seas will be brought to you,
to you the riches of the nations will come.” (Isaiah 60:1-5)

Salvation will come to Israel, and ultimately through Israel at the hand of the Son, the King of Kings- and this salvation and blessing will come “swiftly” (verse 22):
“No longer will violence be heard in your land,
nor ruin or destruction within your borders,
but you will call your walls Salvation
and your gates Praise.
19 The sun will no more be your light by day,
nor will the brightness of the moon shine on you,
for the Lord will be your everlasting light,
and your God will be your glory.
20 Your sun will never set again,
and your moon will wane no more;
the Lord will be your everlasting light,
and your days of sorrow will end.

21 Then all your people will be righteous
and they will possess the land forever.
They are the shoot I have planted,
the work of my hands,
for the display of my splendor.
22 The least of you will become a thousand,
the smallest a mighty nation.
I am the Lord;
in its time I will do this swiftly." (Isaiah 60:18-22)

Roughly nine hundred years later, Jesus would read the next passage of Isaiah from a scroll in the synagogue, and the course of history would change as He started His public ministry. I have wondered how many times he studies these words as a child and a young man, realizing that he was the One who would accomplish all this:
"The Spirit of the Sovereign Lord is on me,
because the Lord has anointed me
to proclaim good news to the poor.
He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted,
to proclaim freedom for the captives
and release from darkness for the prisoners,
2 to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor
and the day of vengeance of our God,
to comfort all who mourn,
3 and provide for those who grieve in Zion—
to bestow on them a crown of beauty
instead of ashes,
the oil of joy
instead of mourning,
and a garment of praise
instead of a spirit of despair.
They will be called oaks of righteousness,
a planting of the Lord
for the display of his splendor." (Isaiah 61:1-3).
God had not just appointed "anyone" Jesus thought, God appointed Me to do this! The magnificent taperstry of the vision given to Isaiah, and ultimately to the Lord Himself, continues. It is a vision of restoration, hope, and true peace that can come only from the Father:
"Instead of your shame
you will receive a double portion,
and instead of disgrace
you will rejoice in your inheritance.
And so you will inherit a double portion in your land,
and everlasting joy will be yours.
8 "For I, the Lord, love justice;
I hate robbery and wrongdoing.
In my faithfulness I will reward my people
and make an everlasting covenant with them.
9 Their descendants will be known among the nations

and their offspring among the peoples.
All who see them will acknowledge
that they are a people the Lord has blessed."
10 I delight greatly in the Lord;
my soul rejoices in my God.
For he has clothed me with garments of salvation
and arrayed me in a robe of his righteousness,
as a bridegroom adorns his head like a priest,
and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels.
11 For as the soil makes the sprout come up
and a garden causes seeds to grow,
so the Sovereign Lord will make righteousness
and praise spring up before all nations." (Isaiah 61:7-11)



http://wallpaper4god.com/en/background_isaiah-617/

1 Thessalonians 4

How should we then live? A foundational and fundamental question, and the title of a classis work from Francis Schaeffer. Paul answers this question with authority and power, explaining to the church that he and his "team" have taught this by example as well as by teaching verbally. He has shown them what a transformed life "looks like", and explains to them that this is an imperative in living a life that please God, not man himself: *"As for other matters, brothers and sisters, we instructed you how to live in order to please God, as in fact you are living. Now we ask you and urge you in the Lord Jesus to do this more and more. 2 For you know what instructions we*

gave you by the authority of the Lord Jesus." (1 Thess. 4:1-2). The authority for this is the Lord Himself!

Then Paul, ever with a mind for detail, spells oput some examples of the life that pleases God. He reminds the church that they are "sanctified"- they are being made into children of God that are "holy"- set apart from the world for a special purpose. One of the outcomes of this is a life that is a witness to the transforming and purifying power of God Himself: *"It is God's will that you should be sanctified: that you should avoid sexual immorality; 4 that each of you should learn to control your own body in a way that is holy and honorable, 5 not in passionate lust like the pagans, who do not know God; 6 and that in this matter no one should wrong or take advantage of a brother or sister. The Lord will punish all those who commit such sins, as we told you and warned you before. 7 For God did not call us to be impure, but to live a holy life. 8 Therefore, anyone who rejects this instruction does not reject a human being but God, the very God who gives you his Holy Spirit.9 Now about your love for one another we do not need to write to you, for you yourselves have been taught by God to love each other. 10 And in fact, you do love all of God's family throughout Macedonia. Yet we urge you, brothers and sisters, to do so more and more, 11 and to make it your ambition to lead a quiet life: You should mind your own business and work with your hands, just as we told you, 12 so that your daily life may win the respect of outsiders and so that you will not be dependent on anybody."* (1 Thess. 4:3-12).

Paul then deals with a subject that must have been a constant question in the church, one that erquired pastoral attention and teaching- the fate of those who were "asleep" in the Lord. There has been more than a little controversy about the next verses, since the "Rapture" is described in some detail here. For some, who have been taught since childhood that we immediately "go to heaven" at the moment of our death, the very concept of being "asleep in the Lord" may be foreign or even threatening. I have often explained that it must be somewhat like falling asleep in life, dreaming (in the constant care of the Father) and then awakening- first to judjment and then to fellowship with Him forever. The description here is that first those "asleep" will be raised up, and then those still alive will join them and meet Him "in the air". Pauls' words are:
"Brothers and sisters, we do not want you to be uninformed about those who sleep in death, so that you do not grieve like the rest of mankind, who have no hope. 14 For we believe that Jesus died and rose again, and so we believe that God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in him. 15 According to the Lord's word, we tell you that we who are still alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will certainly not precede those who have fallen asleep. 16 For the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. 17 After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord forever. 18 Therefore encourage one another with these words." (1 Thess. 4:13-18). Whether or not we are literal about the description here, it is important that we understand that we have hope in the resurrection and the power of God- He has conquered death for us and we have assurance that he will care for us always!

What higher compliment could God pay to His people than to give them a “new name”? And what a name it was – God called Israel Hephzibah (“my delight is in her”) and the land Beulah (“married”). This is similar to what God will do for the belivers who have persevered and are “victorious”, as we see in Revelation 2:17 ““To the one who is victorious, I will give some of the hidden manna. I will also give that person a white stone with a new name written on it, known only to the one who receives it”

A new name implies a new relationship- we will receive the benefits of a new relationship with the Father, Son and Spirit that is not marred with sin. Israel was giuven a new name as a symbol of the revived and renewed relationship that God was establishing with them. God tell Isaiah:

For Zion’s sake I will not keep silent,
for Jerusalem’s sake I will not remain quiet,
till her vindication shines out like the dawn,
her salvation like a blazing torch.
2 The nations will see your vindication,
and all kings your glory;
you will be called by a new name
that the mouth of the Lord will bestow.
3 You will be a crown of splendor in the Lord’s hand,
a royal diadem in the hand of your God.
4 No longer will they call you Deserted,
or name your land Desolate.
But you will be called Hephzibah,
and your land Beulah;
for the Lord will take delight in you,
and your land will be married.
5 As a young man marries a young woman,
so will your Builder marry you;
as a bridegroom rejoices over his bride,
so will your God rejoice over you.” (Isaiah 62:1-5).

The relationship is likened to that of a young man and his beloved and precious bride- so strong and intimate is the relationship that God establishes with His beloved children! God then promises to be the Protector and Defender of His beloved children, his esteemed nation:

“The Lord has sworn by his right hand
and by his mighty arm:
“Never again will I give your grain
as food for your enemies,
and never again will foreigners drink the new wine
for which you have toiled;
9 but those who harvest it will eat it
and praise the Lord,
and those who gather the grapes will drink it
in the courts of my sanctuary.”
10 Pass through, pass through the gates!
Prepare the way for the people.
Build up, build up the highway!

Remove the stones.
Raise a banner for the nations.
11 The Lord has made proclamation
to the ends of the earth:
“Say to Daughter Zion,
‘See, your Savior comes!
See, his reward is with him,
and his recompense accompanies him.’”
12 They will be called the Holy People,
the Redeemed of the Lord;
and you will be called Sought After,
the City No Longer Deserted.” (Isaiah 62:8-12)

In language similar to that in Revelation, God promises to take revenge on those who have besieged, conquered and defeated His people:
“Who is this coming from Edom,
from Bozrah, with his garments stained crimson?
Who is this, robed in splendor,
striding forward in the greatness of his strength?
“It is I, proclaiming victory,
mighty to save.”
2 Why are your garments red,
like those of one treading the winepress?
3 “I have trodden the winepress alone;
from the nations no one was with me.
I trampled them in my anger
and trod them down in my wrath;
their blood spattered my garments,
and I stained all my clothing.
4 It was for me the day of vengeance;
the year for me to redeem had come.
5 I looked, but there was no one to help,
I was appalled that no one gave support;
so my own arm achieved salvation for me,
and my own wrath sustained me.
6 I trampled the nations in my anger;
in my wrath I made them drunk
and poured their blood on the ground.” (Isaiah 63:1-6)

God responds to His children proportionally to their beliefe and obedience or their disbelief and rebellion. This one constant theme is pervasive in the Old Testament. The people are oppressed and cry out to God. He hears and forvic=ves them and restores them. They then become self satisfied, dself righteous and self centered, and abandon God. Then an enemy overtakes them and pts thim in bondage and great despair- they then cry out to the Lord and the cycle continues. God sent prophet after prophet to persuade His people to be constant and faithful, but in the end they could not! This is the pattern we see here:
“I will tell of the kindnesses of the Lord,
the deeds for which he is to be praised,
according to all the Lord has done for us—

yes, the many good things
he has done for Israel,
according to his compassion and many kindnesses.
8 He said, “Surely they are my people,
children who will be true to me”;
and so he became their Savior.
9 In all their distress he too was distressed,
and the angel of his presence saved them.[c]
In his love and mercy he redeemed them;
he lifted them up and carried them
all the days of old.
10 Yet they rebelled
and grieved his Holy Spirit.
So he turned and became their enemy
and he himself fought against them.
11 Then his people recalled[d] the days of old,
the days of Moses and his people—
where is he who brought them through the sea,
with the shepherd of his flock?
Where is he who set
his Holy Spirit among them,
12 who sent his glorious arm of power
to be at Moses’ right hand,
who divided the waters before them,
to gain for himself everlasting renown,
13 who led them through the depths?
Like a horse in open country,
they did not stumble;
14 like cattle that go down to the plain,
they were given rest by the Spirit of the Lord.
This is how you guided your people
to make for yourself a glorious name.
15 Look down from heaven and see,
from your lofty throne, holy and glorious.
Where are your zeal and your might?
Your tenderness and compassion are withheld from us.
16 But you are our Father,
though Abraham does not know us
or Israel acknowledge us;
you, Lord, are our Father,
our Redeemer from of old is your name.
17 Why, Lord, do you make us wander from your ways
and harden our hearts so we do not revere you?
Return for the sake of your servants,
the tribes that are your inheritance.” (Isaiah 63:7-17).

The last few verses almost sound like Israel/God’s people are “blaming God” for their own shortcomings. They ask “Why, Lord, do you make us wander from your ways and harden our hearts so we do not revere you?” (verse 17) Yet the blame is not, is never, on God but on the sinful nature of the people. They choose evil when

they from experience know that good would serve them better. They choose to worship themselves or their undemanding "idols" who they can control instead of the awesome God of creation! It is their fault- and yet they blame their God.

In language very much like that in Romans "All have sinned and come short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23), Isaiah bewails the perseverance of sin among the people. He states that:

"All of us have become like one who is unclean,
and all our righteous acts are like filthy rags;
we all shrivel up like a leaf,
and like the wind our sins sweep us away." (Isaiah 64:6)

Yet God is always waiting, always able and willing to forgive us and redeem us, always able and willing to be our Savior:

"Yet you, Lord, are our Father.
We are the clay, you are the potter;
we are all the work of your hand.
9 Do not be angry beyond measure, Lord;
do not remember our sins forever.
Oh, look on us, we pray,
for we are all your people.
10 Your sacred cities have become a wasteland;
even Zion is a wasteland, Jerusalem a desolation.
11 Our holy and glorious temple, where our ancestors praised you,
has been burned with fire,
and all that we treasured lies in ruins.
12 After all this, Lord, will you hold yourself back?
Will you keep silent and punish us beyond measure?" (Isaiah 64:8-12).

Finally God's people realize the seriousness and severity of their plight, and ask God in sincerity to "look on us". And God, ever faithful, does just that. We see in history that the captivity came to an end, the people were restored to the land, and God kept His promise as He always does (http://www.ldolphin.org/daniel/ezra01.html)

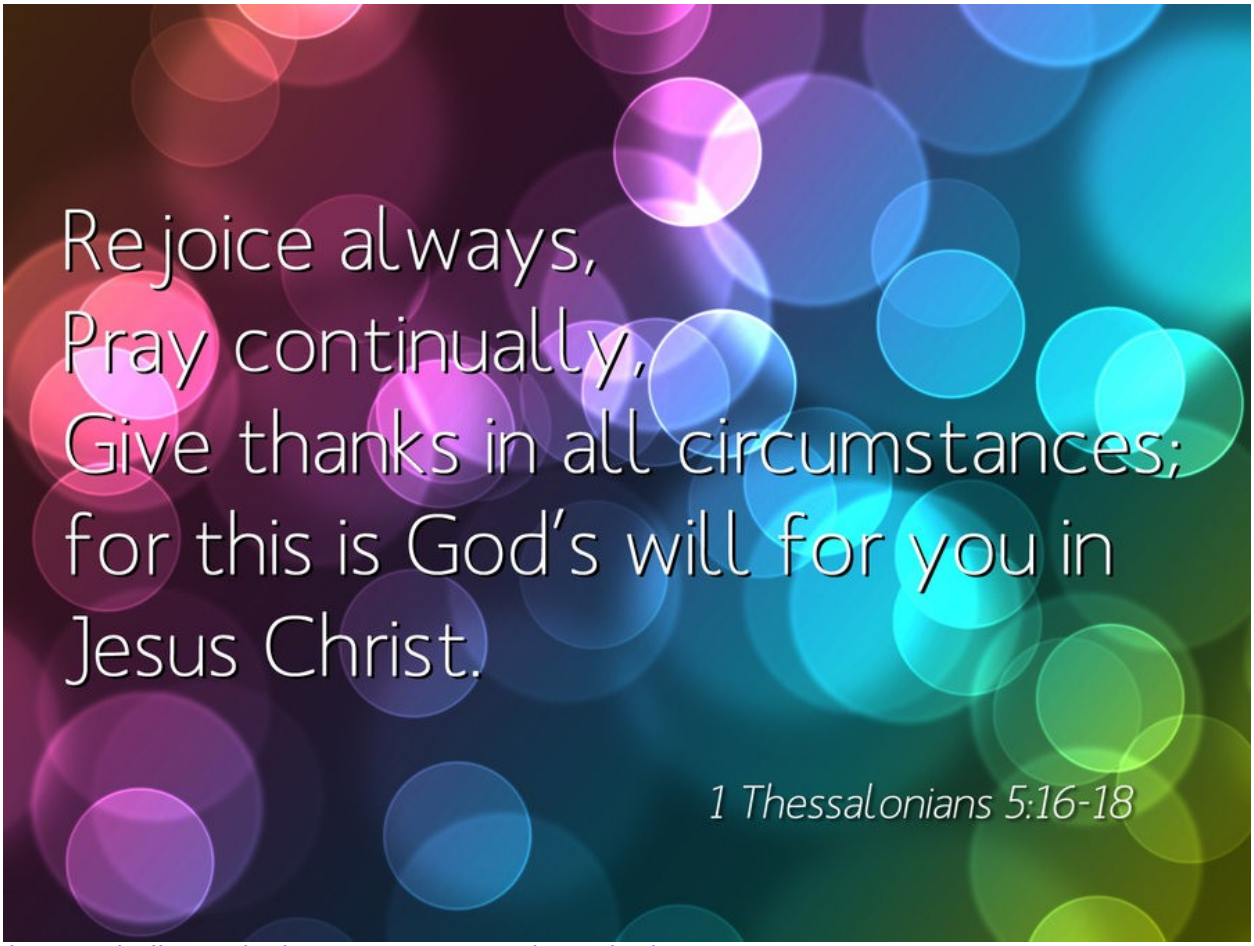
1 Thessalonians 5

The "day of the Lord" is coming! Should we be delighted or terrified? The "day of the Lord" described in Joel (Joel 1:15, 2:1,11,31; 3:14) and several other places in the Old Testament (http://www.gotquestions.org/day-of-the-Lord.html). The day can either be a day of great joy, or of terror and sorrow. The difference in these two has to do with the spiritual state of the person experiencing this "day". For believers, for those who trylu love God and welcome His presence, it is a day of joy, triumph and reconciliation. For those lost in sin, it is a day of terror unimaginable, for this day then is a day of judgment and consequences. Paul speaks to the church about this "day" in warm and welcoming language: *"Now, brothers and sisters, about times and dates we do not need to write to you, 2 for you know very well that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night. 3 While people are saying, "Peace and safety," destruction will come on them suddenly, as labor pains on a pregnant woman, and they will not escape.*
4 But you, brothers and sisters, are not in darkness so that this day should surprise you like a thief. 5 You are all children of the light and children of the day. We do not belong to the night or to the darkness. 6 So then, let us not be like others, who are

asleep, but let us be awake and sober. 7 For those who sleep, sleep at night, and those who get drunk, get drunk at night. 8 But since we belong to the day, let us be sober, putting on faith and love as a breastplate, and the hope of salvation as a helmet. 9 For God did not appoint us to suffer wrath but to receive salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ. 10 He died for us so that, whether we are awake or asleep, we may live together with him. 11 Therefore encourage one another and build each other up, just as in fact you are doing." (1 Thess. 5:1-11).

Notice that Paul assumes that the day of the Lord will be a joyful one for this church, because they are "children of light" (verse 5). The though of being "together with Him" (verse 10) is a delight rather than a threat to the believers- they look forward with joy and anticipation instead of fear and dread.

Paul then gives his final greetings to the church. In his closing words, Paul: 1) gives thanks for those who "work hard among you" (verse 12); 2) encourages them to 'warn the idle and disruptive" but be "patient with everyone" (verse 14); 3) act in such a way as not to "quench the Spirit" (verse 19) by "doing what is good for each other" (verse 15); and 4) to "reject every kind of evil" (verse 22). The result of all this will be an experience of the full measure of the grace of One who always blesses His people: *"Now we ask you, brothers and sisters, to acknowledge those who work hard among you, who care for you in the Lord and who admonish you. 13 Hold them in the highest regard in love because of their work. Live in peace with each other. 14 And we urge you, brothers and sisters, warn those who are idle and disruptive, encourage the disheartened, help the weak, be patient with everyone. 15 Make sure that nobody pays back wrong for wrong, but always strive to do what is good for each other and for everyone else. 16 Rejoice always, 17 pray continually, 18 give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus. 19 Do not quench the Spirit. 20 Do not treat prophecies with contempt 21 but test them all; hold on to what is good, 22 reject every kind of evil. 23 May God himself, the God of peace, sanctify you through and through. May your whole spirit, soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. 24 The one who calls you is faithful, and he will do it. 25 Brothers and sisters, pray for us. 26 Greet all God's people with a holy kiss. 27 I charge you before the Lord to have this letter read to all the brothers and sisters. 28 The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you."* (1 Thess. 5:12-28)



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Isaiah 65-66 **October 18, 2014** **2 Thesaalonians 1**

God continuously offered Himself to His people though they seldom seemed interested or engaged in relationship with Him. He pursues His people, as he pursues them now, and pleads with them to return to His loving care:

"I revealed myself to those who did not ask for me;
I was found by those who did not seek me.
To a nation that did not call on my name,
I said, 'Here am I, here am I.'
2 All day long I have held out my hands
to an obstinate people,
who walk in ways not good,
pursuing their own imaginations—
3 a people who continually provoke me
to my very face,
offering sacrifices in gardens
and burning incense on altars of brick;
4 who sit among the graves
and spend their nights keeping secret vigil;
who eat the flesh of pigs,

and whose pots hold broth of impure meat;
5 who say, ‘Keep away; don’t come near me,
for I am too sacred for you!’
Such people are smoke in my nostrils,
a fire that keeps burning all day.
6 “See, it stands written before me:
I will not keep silent but will pay back in full;
I will pay it back into their laps—
7 both your sins and the sins of your ancestors,”
says the Lord.
“Because they burned sacrifices on the mountains
and defied me on the hills,
I will measure into their laps
the full payment for their former deeds.” (Isaiah 65:1-7)
He is not blind to their disobedience and sin, and attaches consequences to their sins- not out or vengeance but as correction- just as a fther disciplines a child that he loves (Prov. 3:12).

The Lord then declares that he will establish a “new heaven and earth”, much like the description found later in Scripture (Rev. 21). The vision here includes details that illustrate the God is supremely in control, and that sin, death sickness and sadness have been banished and vanquished:
“See, I will create
new heavens and a new earth.
The former things will not be remembered,
nor will they come to mind.
18 But be glad and rejoice forever
in what I will create,
for I will create Jerusalem to be a delight
and its people a joy.
19 I will rejoice over Jerusalem
and take delight in my people;
the sound of weeping and of crying
will be heard in it no more.
20 “Never again will there be in it
an infant who lives but a few days,
or an old man who does not live out his years;
the one who dies at a hundred
will be thought a mere child;
the one who fails to reach[a] a hundred
will be considered accursed.
21 They will build houses and dwell in them;
they will plant vineyards and eat their fruit.
22 No longer will they build houses and others live in them,
or plant and others eat.
For as the days of a tree,
so will be the days of my people;
my chosen ones will long enjoy
the work of their hands.
23 They will not labor in vain,

nor will they bear children doomed to misfortune;
for they will be a people blessed by the Lord,
they and their descendants with them.
24 Before they call I will answer;
while they are still speaking I will hear.
25 The wolf and the lamb will feed together,
and the lion will eat straw like the ox,
and dust will be the serpent's food.
They will neither harm nor destroy
on all my holy mountain,"
says the Lord." (Isaiah 65:17-25)

God is never impressed with "half hearted worship" or partial obedience, he demands, and deserves, our very best! Jesus tried to show his contemporaries this great truth in several ways- He healed on the Sabbath to show what the Sabbath really was- a gift from God and not a "burdensome collection of rules". He pointed to a tax collector as "justified" and a Pharisee as far from the kingdom based on the heart attitudes they both brought to prayers (Luke 8:9-14). Here God shows us that He is not please with our worship if it does not represent the true desire of our hearts and souls to be and delight in the very presence of God:
This is what the Lord says:

"Heaven is my throne,
and the earth is my footstool.
Where is the house you will build for me?
Where will my resting place be?
2 Has not my hand made all these things,
and so they came into being?"
declares the Lord.
"These are the ones I look on with favor:
those who are humble and contrite in spirit,
and who tremble at my word.
3 But whoever sacrifices a bull
is like one who kills a person,
and whoever offers a lamb
is like one who breaks a dog's neck;
whoever makes a grain offering
is like one who presents pig's blood,
and whoever burns memorial incense
is like one who worships an idol.
They have chosen their own ways,
and they delight in their abominations;
4 so I also will choose harsh treatment for them
and will bring on them what they dread.
For when I called, no one answered,
when I spoke, no one listened.
They did evil in my sight
and chose what displeases me." (Isaiah 66:1-4)

God continues to offer welcome to Himself and hope for those who trust Him:

For this is what the Lord says:

“I will extend peace to her like a river,
and the wealth of nations like a flooding stream;
you will nurse and be carried on her arm
and dandled on her knees.
13 As a mother comforts her child,
so will I comfort you;
and you will be comforted over Jerusalem.”
14 When you see this, your heart will rejoice
and you will flourish like grass;
the hand of the Lord will be made known to his servants,
but his fury will be shown to his foes.
15 See, the Lord is coming with fire,
and his chariots are like a whirlwind;
he will bring down his anger with fury,
and his rebuke with flames of fire.
16 For with fire and with his sword
the Lord will execute judgment on all people,
and many will be those slain by the Lord.” (Isaiah 66:12-16)

In a final vision given to Isaiah, God declares that he will gather “all His people” together and He will reign over them for eternity:
“And I, because of what they have planned and done, am about to come[b] and gather the people of all nations and languages, and they will come and see my glory.

19 “I will set a sign among them, and I will send some of those who survive to the nations—to Tarshish, to the Libyans[c] and Lydians (famous as archers), to Tubal and Greece, and to the distant islands that have not heard of my fame or seen my glory. They will proclaim my glory among the nations. 20 And they will bring all your people, from all the nations, to my holy mountain in Jerusalem as an offering to the Lord—on horses, in chariots and wagons, and on mules and camels,” says the Lord. “They will bring them, as the Israelites bring their grain offerings, to the temple of the Lord in ceremonially clean vessels. 21 And I will select some of them also to be priests and Levites,” says the Lord.

22 “As the new heavens and the new earth that I make will endure before me,” declares the Lord, “so will your name and descendants endure. 23 From one New Moon to another and from one Sabbath to another, all mankind will come and bow down before me,” says the Lord. 24 “And they will go out and look on the dead bodies of those who rebelled against me; the worms that eat them will not die, the fire that burns them will not be quenched, and they will be loathsome to all mankind.” (Isaiah 66:18-24)

http://blessedmamasheaven.com/wwjd/cutelittlegirlwood/

2 Thessalonians 1

As was his practice, Paul greets the church warmly and with affection that comes from working together on the "things that really matter"- the work of the Kingdom. He is delighted with the response and faith that he has seen in these believers: *"To the church of the Thessalonians in God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ: 2 Grace and peace to you from God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. 3 We ought always to thank God for you, brothers and sisters,[b] and rightly so, because your faith is growing more and more, and the love all of you have for one another is increasing. 4 Therefore, among God's churches we boast about your perseverance and faith in all the persecutions and trials you are enduring."* (2 Thess. 1:1-4).

As a Christian sister once reminded me, without a **test** there is no real **testimony**! These believrs have endured, they have suffered, they have been tested by a hostile world and by the sin that still inserts itself into all human activity, and yet they have shown love and perserverence, and Paul is glad to "boast about your perseverance and faith". What a tribute to the power of God's Holy Spirit!

All this has happened because these gathered as the family of God have believed and trusted, and allowed the wonderful Creator God to fill them with grace and power through the Spirit. Paul states it this way: *"All this is evidence that God's judgment is right, and as a result you will be counted worthy of the kingdom of God, for which you are suffering. 6 God is just: He will pay back trouble to those who trouble you 7 and give relief to you who are troubled, and to us as well. This will happen when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven in blazing fire with his powerful angels. 8 He will punish those who do not know God and do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. 9 They will be punished with everlasting destruction and shut out from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might 10 on the day he comes to be glorified in his holy people and to be marveled at among all*

those who have believed. This includes you, because you believed our testimony to you." (2 Thess. 1:5-10). Notice Paul put primary emphasis on the fact that these in the church "believed our testimony to you". This belief involved commitment and action- not simple intellectual assent.

Paul, knowing that God has established His church in this place through the power of the Spirit, promises them a great gift- his constant intercessory prayer. He promses to pray for them, so that God can continue the good work that he has already started in their midst: *"With this in mind, we constantly pray for you, that our God may make you worthy of his calling, and that by his power he may bring to fruition your every desire for goodness and your every deed prompted by faith. 12 We pray this so that the name of our Lord Jesus may be glorified in you, and you in him, according to the grace of our God and the Lord Jesus Christ."* (2 Thess. 1:11-12). The goal of this prayer is that God will make them "worthy of His calling" and that all their deeds will be "prompted by faith". When this happens in a church, the Lord is truly glorified and many are attracted to Him as God draws them to Himself (John 6:44).

Jeremiah 1-2 October 19, 2014 2 Thessalonians 2

Jeremiah, often called the "weeping prophet" was called by God to warn his people of the imminent threat of Babylonian conquest and captivity (Jeremiah, New Bible Dictionary, Second Edition, Tyndale Press, Wheaton, IL, USA 1987.) jeremiah was a "major" prophet, in that his book of prophesy was "long", probably requiring an entire scroll for the written version of the book. He prophesied in Israel from about 626 to 587 BC, just after the fall of the Temple in Jerusalem. The Scripture dates his prophetic activity by the reign of the kings during that time: *"The words of Jeremiah son of Hilkiah, one of the priests at Anathoth in the territory of Benjamin. 2 The word of the Lord came to him in the thirteenth year of the reign of Josiah son of Amon king of Judah, 3 and through the reign of Jehoiakim son of Josiah king of Judah, down to the fifth month of the eleventh year of Zedekiah son of Josiah king of Judah, when the people of Jerusalem went into exile."* (Jer. 1:1-3) Jeremiah was Hilkiah's son, the priest that discovered the lost book(s) of the Law during Josiah's reign (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hilkiah).

Jeremiah's call is reminiscent in some ways to the call of Moses. Moses, we remember, was reluctant to stand in front of his people, or to go to Pharaoh with requests, and asked God to 'excuse" him because he did not speak well in public (Exodus 3:11-12; 4:10-13). Jeremiah is overwhelmed by God's call, and responds "I am too young!"

"The word of the Lord came to me, saying,
5 "Before I formed you in the womb I knew[a] you,
before you were born I set you apart;
I appointed you as a prophet to the nations."
6 "Alas, Sovereign Lord," I said, "I do not know how to speak; I am too young."
7 But the Lord said to me, "Do not say, 'I am too young.' You must go to everyone I send you to and say whatever I command you. 8 Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you and will rescue you," declares the Lord. 9 Then the Lord reached out his

hand and touched my mouth and said to me, “I have put my words in your mouth.
10 See, today I appoint you over nations and kingdoms to uproot and tear down, to
destroy and overthrow, to build and to plant.”
11 The word of the Lord came to me: “What do you see, Jeremiah?” “I see the
branch of an almond tree,” I replied. 12 The Lord said to me, “You have seen
correctly, for I am watching[b] to see that my word is fulfilled.” 13 The word of the
Lord came to me again: “What do you see?”
“I see a pot that is boiling,” I answered. “It is tilting toward us from the north.”

14 The Lord said to me, “From the north disaster will be poured out on all who live in
the land. 15 I am about to summon all the peoples of the northern kingdoms,”
declares the Lord.

“Their kings will come and set up their thrones
in the entrance of the gates of Jerusalem;
they will come against all her surrounding walls
and against all the towns of Judah.
16 I will pronounce my judgments on my people
because of their wickedness in forsaking me,
in burning incense to other gods
and in worshiping what their hands have made.” (Jer. 1:4-16)

God then describes the incredible departure of His people into the darkness of pagan gods and their detestable worship practices. Child sacrifice, idolatry, and worship in the “high places” were among the many sins that Israel had committed openly and brazenly *“The people of Israel had even gone as far as building high altars to Baal in order to burn their children in fire as offerings.(Jeremiah 19:4,5) This nation had deviated so far from God that they had broken the covenant, causing God to withdraw his blessings. Jeremiah was guided by God to proclaim that the nation of Israel would be faced with famine, be plundered and taken captive by foreigners who would exile them to a foreign land.”*
(http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jeremiah).

God saw their sins, and reminded them that they were once faithful and devoted, but had now strayed from their “first love” and followed idols:
“The word of the Lord came to me: 2 “Go and proclaim in the hearing of Jerusalem:

“This is what the Lord says:

“‘I remember the devotion of your youth,
how as a bride you loved me
and followed me through the wilderness,
through a land not sown.
3 Israel was holy to the Lord,
the firstfruits of his harvest;
all who devoured her were held guilty,
and disaster overtook them,’”
declares the Lord.
4 Hear the word of the Lord, you descendants of Jacob,
all you clans of Israel.

5 This is what the Lord says:

“What fault did your ancestors find in me,
that they strayed so far from me?
They followed worthless idols
and became worthless themselves.
6 They did not ask, ‘Where is the Lord,
who brought us up out of Egypt
and led us through the barren wilderness,
through a land of deserts and ravines,
a land of drought and utter darkness,
a land where no one travels and no one lives?’
7 I brought you into a fertile land
to eat its fruit and rich produce.
But you came and defiled my land
and made my inheritance detestable.
8 The priests did not ask,
‘Where is the Lord?’
Those who deal with the law did not know me;
the leaders rebelled against me.
The prophets prophesied by Baal,
following worthless idols.” (Jer. 2:1-8)

God pronounces judgment on them- their forsaking their God and going their own way has- and will have- very serious consequences:

“Therefore I bring charges against you again,”
declares the Lord.
“And I will bring charges against your children’s children.
10 Cross over to the coasts of Cyprus and look,
send to Kedar[c] and observe closely;
see if there has ever been anything like this:
11 Has a nation ever changed its gods?
(Yet they are not gods at all.)
But my people have exchanged their glorious God
for worthless idols.
12 Be appalled at this, you heavens,
and shudder with great horror,”
declares the Lord.
13 “My people have committed two sins:
They have forsaken me,
the spring of living water,
and have dug their own cisterns,
broken cisterns that cannot hold water.
14 Is Israel a servant, a slave by birth?
Why then has he become plunder?
15 Lions have roared;
they have growled at him.
They have laid waste his land;
his towns are burned and deserted.
16 Also, the men of Memphis and Tahpanhes
have cracked your skull.

17 Have you not brought this on yourselves
by forsaking the Lord your God
when he led you in the way?
18 Now why go to Egypt
to drink water from the Nile[d]?
And why go to Assyria
to drink water from the Euphrates?
19 Your wickedness will punish you;
your backsliding will rebuke you.
Consider then and realize
how evil and bitter it is for you
when you forsake the Lord your God
and have no awe of me,"
declares the Lord, the Lord Almighty." (Jer. 2:9-19)
Note that God has two issues with His people: 1) they have forsaken/forgotten their true God; 2) they have "dug their own cisterns" which is symbolic for "going their own way (verse 13). God provides the rain- and every iother good gift, but the people have stubbornly refused to accept God's giftf with joy and instead insist on theor own sinful ways! And their "cisterns" are "broken"- they cannot hold water. This shows the people that their ways lead to destruction- only God's path leads to peace, joy and restoration.

Though the people might try to "cleanse themselves", the stain of their guilt still remains. God likens his people to a runaway animal, which cannot be corralled and brought into a useful working role:
"Although you wash yourself with soap
and use an abundance of cleansing powder,
the stain of your guilt is still before me,"
declares the Sovereign Lord.
23 "How can you say, 'I am not defiled;
I have not run after the Baals'?
See how you behaved in the valley;
consider what you have done.
You are a swift she-camel
running here and there,
24 a wild donkey accustomed to the desert,
sniffing the wind in her craving—
in her heat who can restrain her?
Any males that pursue her need not tire themselves;
at mating time they will find her." (Jer. 2:22-24)

The people insist that they "love" their idols and foreign gods (verse 25), and thus try to justify their running after them. God will have none of this:
"Do not run until your feet are bare
and your throat is dry.
But you said, 'It's no use!
I love foreign gods,
and I must go after them.'
26 "As a thief is disgraced when he is caught,
so the people of Israel are disgraced—

they, their kings and their officials,
their priests and their prophets.
27 They say to wood, 'You are my father,'
and to stone, 'You gave me birth.'
They have turned their backs to me
and not their faces;
yet when they are in trouble, they say,
'Come and save us!'
28 Where then are the gods you made for yourselves?
Let them come if they can save you
when you are in trouble!
For you, Judah, have as many gods
as you have towns.
29 "Why do you bring charges against me?
You have all rebelled against me,"
declares the Lord." (Jer. 2:25-29)

God states that they have "innocent blood" on their clothing (verse 30), and that their reliance on foreign allies to protect them is a plan doomed to fail. They will be led out of their land with their "hands on their heads" (verse 37), a symbolic surrender and submission to the conquering forces that will soon surround and exile them:

"On your clothes is found
the lifeblood of the innocent poor,
though you did not catch them breaking in.
Yet in spite of all this
35 you say, 'I am innocent;
he is not angry with me.'
But I will pass judgment on you
because you say, 'I have not sinned.'
36 Why do you go about so much,
changing your ways?
You will be disappointed by Egypt
as you were by Assyria.
37 You will also leave that place
with your hands on your head,
for the Lord has rejected those you trust;
you will not be helped by them." (Jer. 2:34-37)

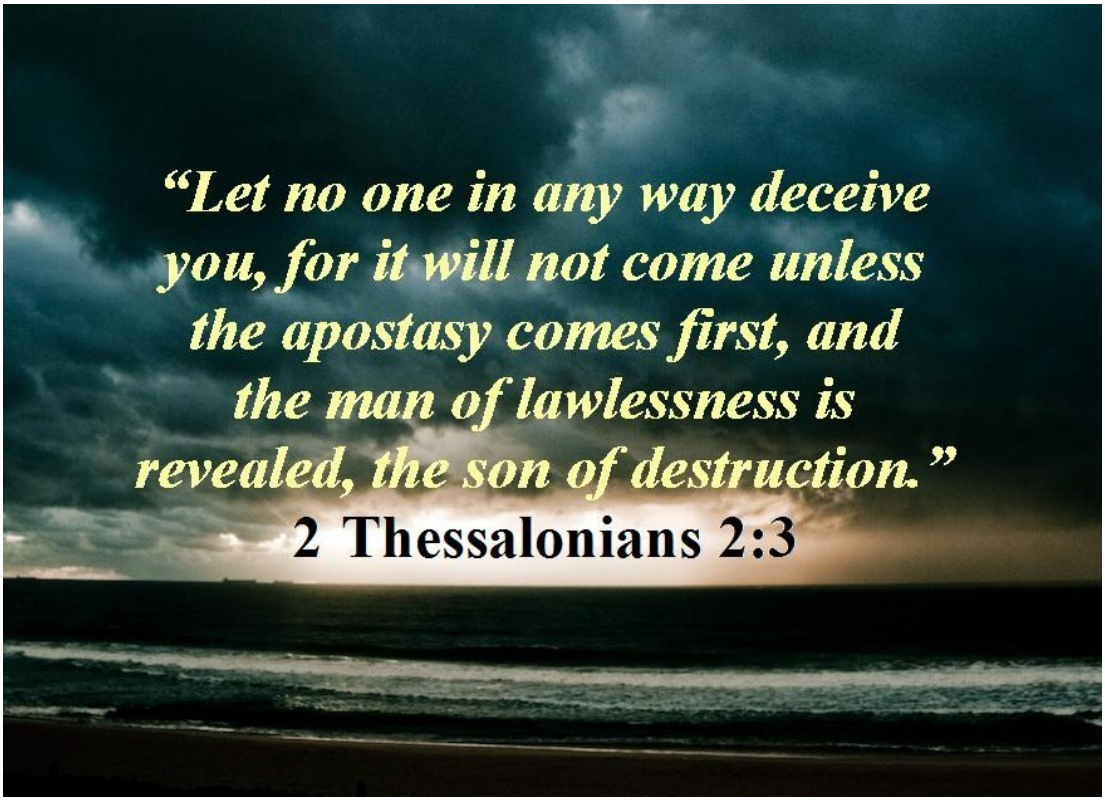
2 Thessalonians 2

There is very little dispute among Bible scholars and students that those in the first century church expected Jesus' imminent return. Jesus Himself told them "this generation will certainly not pass away until all these things have happened" (Matthew 24:34, also see Luke 21:32). Among the things predicted was the destruction of the Temple. There are several schools of thought in the interpretation of this passage. My common sense tells me that Jesus has not "come again"- there are too many Biblical events that would have to have already taken place, or be happening now, for that to be true. What I think we are left with is the concept of a "short term" and "long term" fulfilment of prophecy. Just as we saw in the prophecy

about the Suffering Servant in Isaiah, the “short term” fulfilment of the prophecy was likely a leader who fit the description of this servant- and the long term fulfilment was Jesus Himself! Here we see the Temple destroyed in about 70 AD, well within the lifetime of many who heard Jesus’ words in about 32-33 AD. Paul writes to the Thessalonian church: *“Concerning the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our being gathered to him, we ask you, brothers and sisters, 2 not to become easily unsettled or alarmed by the teaching allegedly from us—whether by a prophecy or by word of mouth or by letter—asserting that the day of the Lord has already come. 3 Don’t let anyone deceive you in any way, for that day will not come until the rebellion occurs and the man of lawlessness[a] is revealed, the man doomed to destruction. 4 He will oppose and will exalt himself over everything that is called God or is worshiped, so that he sets himself up in God’s temple, proclaiming himself to be God.”* (2 Thess 2:1-4)

Paul explains that the deceiver, the father of lies, the evil one will present himself to be the savior of the world, but that he is being “held back” (verse 6) for a while. Many believe the evil one is being detained until all who will respond to the Gospel have responded- then we will experience the end time events described in Scripture: *“Don’t you remember that when I was with you I used to tell you these things? 6 And now you know what is holding him back, so that he may be revealed at the proper time. 7 For the secret power of lawlessness is already at work; but the one who now holds it back will continue to do so till he is taken out of the way. 8 And then the lawless one will be revealed, whom the Lord Jesus will overthrow with the breath of his mouth and destroy by the splendor of his coming. 9 The coming of the lawless one will be in accordance with how Satan works. He will use all sorts of displays of power through signs and wonders that serve the lie, 10 and all the ways that wickedness deceives those who are perishing. They perish because they refused to love the truth and so be saved. 11 For this reason God sends them a powerful delusion so that they will believe the lie 12 and so that all will be condemned who have not believed the truth but have delighted in wickedness.”* (2 Thess. 2:5-12).

The answer to this coming evil- as well as the evil already at work in the world? Stand firm! The apostle offers these words of encouragement: *“But we ought always to thank God for you, brothers and sisters loved by the Lord, because God chose you as firstfruits[b] to be saved through the sanctifying work of the Spirit and through belief in the truth. 14 He called you to this through our gospel, that you might share in the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ. 15 So then, brothers and sisters, stand firm and hold fast to the teachings[c] we passed on to you, whether by word of mouth or by letter. 16 May our Lord Jesus Christ himself and God our Father, who loved us and by his grace gave us eternal encouragement and good hope, 17 encourage your hearts and strengthen you in every good deed and word.”* (2 Thess. 2:13-17).



http://missionventureministries.wordpress.com/2011/08/22/what-is-apostasy-%E2%80%93-2-thessalonians-23/

Jeremiah 3-4 October 20, 2014 2 Thessalonians 3

God has often used the metaphor of an unfaithful wife to describe the unfaithfulness of Israel. Having experienced some of the pain that unfaithfulness can cause, I can personally relate to the disruption of trust and intimacy that is the inevitable result of this covenant breaking. God tells Jeremiah that He has been disappointed, hurt and troubled by the rampant and open unfaithfulness of His people:

"If a man divorces his wife
and she leaves him and marries another man,
should he return to her again?
Would not the land be completely defiled?
But you have lived as a prostitute with many lovers—
would you now return to me?"
declares the LORD.
2 "Look up to the barren heights and see.
Is there any place where you have not been ravished?
By the roadside you sat waiting for lovers,
sat like a nomad in the desert.
You have defiled the land
with your prostitution and wickedness.
3 Therefore the showers have been withheld,
and no spring rains have fallen.
Yet you have the brazen look of a prostitute;

you refuse to blush with shame.
4 Have you not just called to me:
‘My Father, my friend from my youth,
5 will you always be angry?
Will your wrath continue forever?’
This is how you talk,
but you do all the evil you can.” (Jer. 3:1-5)
Israel is personified as a “prostitute with many lovers” who has left her first love and sinned against her covenant and the One who established it.

Interestingly and unexpectedly, God states that he is less troubled by faithless Israel than unfaithful Judah. This is somewhat surprising in that “some faith” would seem to be preferable to “no faith”. However God demands- and expects and deserved- complete obedience. Anything less is sin. So “unfaithful” Judah is looked at by God as more troubling: *“During the reign of King Josiah, the Lord said to me, “Have you seen what faithless Israel has done? She has gone up on every high hill and under every spreading tree and has committed adultery there. 7 I thought that after she had done all this she would return to me but she did not, and her unfaithful sister Judah saw it. 8 I gave faithless Israel her certificate of divorce and sent her away because of all her adulteries. Yet I saw that her unfaithful sister Judah had no fear; she also went out and committed adultery. 9 Because Israel’s immorality mattered so little to her, she defiled the land and committed adultery with stone and wood. 10 In spite of all this, her unfaithful sister Judah did not return to me with all her heart, but only in pretense,” declares the Lord. 11 The Lord said to me, “Faithless Israel is more righteous than unfaithful Judah. 12 Go, proclaim this message toward the north:*
“‘Return, faithless Israel,’ declares the Lord,
‘I will frown on you no longer,
for I am faithful,’ declares the Lord,
‘I will not be angry forever.
13 Only acknowledge your guilt—
you have rebelled against the Lord your God,
you have scattered your favors to foreign gods
under every spreading tree,
and have not obeyed me,’”
declares the Lord.” (Jer. 3:6-13)
God is offended because Judah only returned to God “in pretense” (verse 10). Heart attitude is critical! Despite the focus of most of the Hebrew Scriptures on the outward actions of a person, it is God who “sees the heart” (1 Samuel 16:7; Jeremiah 17:10) and desires obedience from the heart.

God then tells Jeremiah that he longs to “gather his children” to Him and restore a relationship of mutual love and trust with them:
“I myself said,

“‘How gladly would I treat you like my children
and give you a pleasant land,
the most beautiful inheritance of any nation.’
I thought you would call me ‘Father’
and not turn away from following me.

20 But like a woman unfaithful to her husband,
so you, Israel, have been unfaithful to me,”
declares the Lord.
21 A cry is heard on the barren heights,
the weeping and pleading of the people of Israel,
because they have perverted their ways
and have forgotten the Lord their God.
22 “Return, faithless people;
I will cure you of backsliding.”
“Yes, we will come to you,
for you are the Lord our God.
23 Surely the idolatrous commotion on the hills
and mountains is a deception;
surely in the Lord our God
is the salvation of Israel.
24 From our youth shameful gods have consumed
the fruits of our ancestors’ labor—
their flocks and herds,
their sons and daughters.
25 Let us lie down in our shame,
and let our disgrace cover us.
We have sinned against the Lord our God,
both we and our ancestors;
from our youth till this day
we have not obeyed the Lord our God.” (Jer. 3:19-25)

God is full of “if/then” statements to His people. If, God says, you will obey me, then I will bless you. God repeats this condition for restoration of the broken relationship to His people. He wants them not to simply “circumcise” but to “circumcise the heart” (verse 4):

“If you, Israel, will return,
then return to me,”
declares the Lord.
“If you put your detestable idols out of my sight
and no longer go astray,
2 and if in a truthful, just and righteous way
you swear, ‘As surely as the Lord lives,’
then the nations will invoke blessings by him
and in him they will boast.”
3 This is what the Lord says to the people of Judah and to Jerusalem:

“Break up your unplowed ground
and do not sow among thorns.
4 Circumcise yourselves to the Lord,
circumcise your hearts,
you people of Judah and inhabitants of Jerusalem,
or my wrath will flare up and burn like fire
because of the evil you have done—
burn with no one to quench it.” (Jer. 4:1-4)

We see this theme clearly in the latter part of Jeremiah's book of prophecy, in chapter 31, where God explores the possibilities of a new covenant with His people- a covenant in which he writes the Law not on tablets of stone but on their hearts (verse 33):

"The days are coming," declares the Lord,
"when I will make a new covenant
with the people of Israel
and with the people of Judah.
32 It will not be like the covenant
I made with their ancestors
when I took them by the hand
to lead them out of Egypt,
because they broke my covenant,
though I was a husband to them,"
declares the Lord.
33 "This is the covenant I will make with the people of Israel
after that time," declares the Lord.
"I will put my law in their minds
and write it on their hearts.
I will be their God,
and they will be my people.
34 No longer will they teach their neighbor,
or say to one another, 'Know the Lord,'
because they will all know me,
from the least of them to the greatest,"
declares the Lord.
"For I will forgive their wickedness
and will remember their sins no more." (Jer. 31:31-34)

The judgment of the Lord is coming- and the power "from the North" is poised to sweep through Judah, destrotying and reeking havoc as it goes through the land. The people witnessing this destruction will be "appalled" (verse 9):

"Announce in Judah and proclaim in Jerusalem and say:
'Sound the trumpet throughout the land!'
Cry aloud and say:
'Gather together!
Let us flee to the fortified cities!'
6 Raise the signal to go to Zion!
Flee for safety without delay!
For I am bringing disaster from the north,
even terrible destruction."
7 A lion has come out of his lair;
a destroyer of nations has set out.
He has left his place
to lay waste your land.
Your towns will lie in ruins
without inhabitant.
8 So put on sackcloth,
lament and wail,
for the fierce anger of the LORD

has not turned away from us.
9 “In that day,” declares the LORD,
“the king and the officials will lose heart,
the priests will be horrified,
and the prophets will be appalled.” (Jer. 4:5-9)

God reminds them that this is a just punishment, brought on by the repeated sins of the people:

“Your own conduct and actions
have brought this on you.
This is your punishment.
How bitter it is!
How it pierces to the heart!” (Jer. 4:18)

Despite the denial of those being punished- their “dressing up” and pretending that all is well (verse 30), the punishment is real and horrifying:

At the sound of horsemen and archers
every town takes to flight.
Some go into the thickets;
some climb up among the rocks.
All the towns are deserted;
no one lives in them.
30 What are you doing, you devastated one?
Why dress yourself in scarlet
and put on jewels of gold?
Why highlight your eyes with makeup?
You adorn yourself in vain.
Your lovers despise you;
they want to kill you.
31 I hear a cry as of a woman in labor,
a groan as of one bearing her first child—
the cry of Daughter Zion gasping for breath,
stretching out her hands and saying,
“Alas! I am fainting;
my life is given over to murderers.” (Jer. 4:29-31)

Jeremiah received Gift of the Prophecy (Jeremiah, I, 4 10) http://www.wikiart.org/en/marc-chagall/jeremiah-received-gift-of-the-prophecy-jeremiah-i-4-10 *Mark Chagal 1956*

2 Thessalonians 3

Intercessory prayer- the great weapon of the believer- a channel of blessing that we so often miss! Paul unashamedly and specifically asks the church to pray for several things: 1) that the faith will spread rapidly; 2) that he, his coworkers and the church be protected from evil and "evil people"; and 3) that God will continue to strengthen and protect from the evil one. The church at this point in history was poised to spread rapidly and make a mojor cultural impact on the known world- and Paul is simply praying (and asking for prayer) that this trend continue: *"As for other matters, brothers and sisters, pray for us that the message of the Lord may spread rapidly and be honored, just as it was with you. 2 And pray that we may be delivered from wicked and evil people, for not everyone has faith. 3 But the Lord is faithful, and he will strengthen you and protect you from the evil one. 4 We have confidence in the Lord that you are doing and will continue to do the things we command. 5 May the Lord direct your hearts into God's love and Christ's perseverance."* (2 Thess. 3:1-5)

There is then a comment on the necessity of work. This "plague" came into being after the Fall in Eden. Before sin entered the world, we were simply to "tend the Garden" that God provided. After the Fall, however, God told Adam that he was to earn his bread by the "sweat of his brow" (Genesis 3:19). Here we see that the community of faith must insist that everyone contribute for the common good. Idleness is not to be tolerated: "*In the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, we command you, brothers and sisters, to keep away from every believer who is idle and disruptive and does not live according to the teaching[a] you received from us. 7 For you yourselves know how you ought to follow our example. We were not idle when we were with you, 8 nor did we eat anyone's food without paying for it. On the contrary, we worked night and day, laboring and toiling so that we would not be a burden to any of you. 9 We did this, not because we do not have the right to such help, but in order to offer ourselves as a model for you to imitate. 10 For even when we were with you, we gave you this rule: "The one who is unwilling to work shall not eat."* (2 Thess. 3:6-10).

Paul then closes his letter with warmth and affection, praying for God's peace among the people: *"Now may the Lord of peace himself give you peace at all times and in every way. The Lord be with all of you. 17 I, Paul, write this greeting in my own hand, which is the distinguishing mark in all my letters. This is how I write. 18 The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you all."* (2 Thess. 3:16-18). If there is any doubt that Paul himself was the author of this letter, it is dispelled by these last few verses. He not only claims to be the author of this letter, but describes the letter as written "in my own hand" instead of a letter dictated and literally put on paper by another!

Jeremiah 5-6 October 21, 2014 1 Timothy 1

According to legend, Diogenes searched for "one honest man (or woman)". Abram was able tpo bargain with God such that is ten righteous men could be found in Sodom the God would spare the city from destruction: *"Then he said, "May the Lord not be angry, but let me speak just once more. What if only ten can be found there?" He answered, "For the sake of ten, I will not destroy it." When the Lord had finished speaking with Abraham, he left, and Abraham returned home."* (Gen 18:32-33) Here God speaks to the lack of any righteous persons, and justifies to Jeremiah the drastic actions he is about to take through foreign invaders/conquerors:

"Go up and down the streets of Jerusalem,
look around and consider,
search through her squares.
If you can find but one person
who deals honestly and seeks the truth,
I will forgive this city.
2 Although they say, 'As surely as the Lord lives,'
still they are swearing falsely."
3 Lord, do not your eyes look for truth?
You struck them, but they felt no pain;
you crushed them, but they refused correction.
They made their faces harder than stone
and refused to repent.

4 I thought, “These are only the poor;
    they are foolish,
for they do not know the way of the Lord,
    the requirements of their God.
5 So I will go to the leaders
    and speak to them;
surely they know the way of the Lord,
    the requirements of their God.”
But with one accord they too had broken off the yoke
    and torn off the bonds.
6 Therefore a lion from the forest will attack them,
    a wolf from the desert will ravage them,
a leopard will lie in wait near their towns
    to tear to pieces any who venture out,
for their rebellion is great
    and their backslidings many.
7 “Why should I forgive you?
    Your children have forsaken me
    and sworn by gods that are not gods.
I supplied all their needs,
    yet they committed adultery
    and thronged to the houses of prostitutes.
8 They are well-fed, lusty stallions,
    each neighing for another man’s wife.
9 Should I not punish them for this?”
    declares the Lord.
“Should I not avenge myself
    on such a nation as this?” (Jer. 5:1-9)

These are reckless people, who feel that no bad consequence will follow their sinning. God, however, has other ideas and plans for them:

They have lied about the Lord;
    they said, “He will do nothing!
No harm will come to us;
    we will never see sword or famine.
13 The prophets are but wind
    and the word is not in them;
    so let what they say be done to them.”
14 Therefore this is what the Lord God Almighty says:

“Because the people have spoken these words,
    I will make my words in your mouth a fire
    and these people the wood it consumes.
15 People of Israel,” declares the Lord,
    “I am bringing a distant nation against you—
an ancient and enduring nation,

a people whose language you do not know,
whose speech you do not understand.
16 Their quivers are like an open grave;
all of them are mighty warriors.
17 They will devour your harvests and food,
devour your sons and daughters;
they will devour your flocks and herds,
devour your vines and fig trees.
With the sword they will destroy
the fortified cities in which you trust." (Jer 5:12-17).

Notice the image of fire (verse 14)- the consuming fire here serves both to punish and to purify. It is God's deepest desire that His people repent and turn to Him, and He must allow invaders to have their way with them to "wake them up" to spiritual reality!

Yet even in the dark times to come, God has mercy- he will not "destroy them all"- as He was tempted to do before after His people worshipped the golden calf: *"But Moses sought the favor of the Lord his God. "Lord," he said, "why should your anger burn against your people, whom you brought out of Egypt with great power and a mighty hand? 12 Why should the Egyptians say, 'It was with evil intent that he brought them out, to kill them in the mountains and to wipe them off the face of the earth'? Turn from your fierce anger; relent and do not bring disaster on your people. 13 Remember your servants Abraham, Isaac and Israel, to whom you swore by your own self: 'I will make your descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and I will give your descendants all this land I promised them, and it will be their inheritance forever.'" 14 Then the Lord relented and did not bring on his people the disaster he had threatened."* (Exodus 32:11-14) God will leave a remnant, a remnant that is still faithful to Him: *"Yet even in those days," declares the Lord, "I will not destroy you completely. 19 And when the people ask, 'Why has the Lord our God done all this to us?' you will tell them, 'As you have forsaken me and served foreign gods in your own land, so now you will serve foreigners in a land not your own.'*

20 "Announce this to the descendants of Jacob
and proclaim it in Judah:
21 Hear this, you foolish and senseless people,
who have eyes but do not see,
who have ears but do not hear:
22 Should you not fear me?" declares the Lord.
"Should you not tremble in my presence?
I made the sand a boundary for the sea,
an everlasting barrier it cannot cross.
The waves may roll, but they cannot prevail;
they may roar, but they cannot cross it.
23 But these people have stubborn and rebellious hearts;
they have turned aside and gone away.
24 They do not say to themselves,
'Let us fear the Lord our God,

who gives autumn and spring rains in season,
who assures us of the regular weeks of harvest.'
25 Your wrongdoings have kept these away;
your sins have deprived you of good." (Jer. 5:19-25)

God has spoken through Moses, through Joshua and the various judges, through Isaiah and the prophets and now through Jeremiah, but the people- His people- will not listen. They are so fixared on going their own way and following their desires that they have neither time nor reverence for the true God, and He reluctantly will now allow bad consequences to happen to them:

"To whom can I speak and give warning?
Who will listen to me?
Their ears are closed[a]
so they cannot hear.
The word of the Lord is offensive to them;
they find no pleasure in it.
11 But I am full of the wrath of the Lord,
and I cannot hold it in.
"Pour it out on the children in the street
and on the young men gathered together;
both husband and wife will be caught in it,
and the old, those weighed down with years.
12 Their houses will be turned over to others,
together with their fields and their wives,
when I stretch out my hand
against those who live in the land,"
declares the Lord.
13 "From the least to the greatest,
all are greedy for gain;
prophets and priests alike,
all practice deceit.
14 They dress the wound of my people
as though it were not serious.
'Peace, peace,' they say,
when there is no peace.
15 Are they ashamed of their detestable conduct?
No, they have no shame at all;
they do not even know how to blush.
So they will fall among the fallen;
they will be brought down when I punish them,"
says the Lord." (Jer. 6:10-15).

The next passage has always been a favorite. When I was active in Shape Note singing, I remember this verse in the preface of the "1991 Book" by Dennison. The reference reads like this "DEDICATED TO All lovers of Sacred Harp Music, and to the memory of the illustrious and venerable patriarchs who established the Traditional Style of Sacred Harp singing and admonished their followers to "seek the old paths and walk therein". (Jer. 6:16). Although the verse out of context is meaningful, it is

interesting to contrast the “pastoral” feel of the verse out of context with the real urgency of the verse in the context of God’s warnings to His people. God is pleading, as He has before so many times, for His people to return to Him, to walk the paths of “righteousness” and not sin and disobedience:
“This is what the Lord says:

“Stand at the crossroads and look;
ask for the ancient paths,
ask where the good way is, and walk in it,
and you will find rest for your souls.
But you said, ‘We will not walk in it.’ (Jer. 6:16)
INterstingly, when the verse is quoted out of context the last phrase “But you said, we will not walk in it” is omitted!

God then tells them- again- that a great conquering army is coming that will completely overcome them, and that they will experience the full measure of punishment and consequence for their continuous sin:
“This is what the Lord says:

“Look, an army is coming
from the land of the north;
a great nation is being stirred up
from the ends of the earth.
23 They are armed with bow and spear;
they are cruel and show no mercy.
They sound like the roaring sea
as they ride on their horses;
they come like men in battle formation
to attack you, Daughter Zion.”
24 We have heard reports about them,
and our hands hang limp.
Anguish has gripped us,
pain like that of a woman in labor.
25 Do not go out to the fields
or walk on the roads,
for the enemy has a sword,
and there is terror on every side.
26 Put on sackcloth, my people,
and roll in ashes;
mourn with bitter wailing
as for an only son,
for suddenly the destroyer
will come upon us.
27 “I have made you a tester of metals
and my people the ore,
that you may observe

and test their ways.
28 They are all hardened rebels,
going about to slander.
They are bronze and iron;
they all act corruptly.
29 The bellows blow fiercely
to burn away the lead with fire,
but the refining goes on in vain;
the wicked are not purged out.
30 They are called rejected silver,
because the Lord has rejected them." (Jer. 6:22-30).

They will be "refined", but the refining will be at least partly in vain since the wicked will still not be "purged out" (verse 29). How sad a state of spiritual affairs that even the refining fire will not accomplish its purifying purpose!

1 Timothy 1

Once in a while we have the wonderful opportunity to "disciple" someone. The process of discipling was ordained by the Lord Jesus Himself in the Great Commission- "therefore go, and make DISCIPLES of all nations" (Matthew 28:19). This is a slow process, involving a commitment of time, patience and forbearance as we take another "under our wing" and treach, train, admonish and mentor them in the way of the Lord.

The genius is that when one disciples (rather than converts) another, this disciple then accepts as part of their covenant and commission to disciple another. The mathematics of this is truly staggering! Assuming a year to disciple, If one disciples another, at the end of that year there are two. Insignificant, you say? Let's keep going. At the end of two years, each disciple mentoring another, there are four. Not enough to reach the word, you may be saying. Bear with me. At the end of three years there are eight. After four, sixteen- after five thrity two and after six, sixty four. The the power of this strategy really comes into play. Each year the "mathematical power" of two increase by one. At the end of 33 years like this- less than two generations- more than eight BILLION people (http://www.minus40.info/sky/powers.html) can be reached for the Lord! This is more than the population of the earth, which reached seven billion on March 12, 2012 (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/World_population). This means the Great Commission could be achieved in full in a little more than 30 years.

Paul had the opportunity and privilege to disciple Timothy, and this discipleship bore much fruit. Paul's letter of love and encouragement to Timothy has been preserved for us, greatly to our benefit: *"Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the command of God our Savior and of Christ Jesus our hope, 2 To Timothy my true son in the faith: Grace, mercy and peace from God the Father and Christ Jesus our Lord."* (1 Tim. 1:1-2). Notice that Paul calls Timothy his "true son in the faith", a testimony to the love and closeness that they shared as they labored together.

Because Timothy has been disciple by Paul, he is now equipped to speak out in counter and opposition to thise who spread false teachings in and to the church: *"As*

I urged you when I went into Macedonia, stay there in Ephesus so that you may command certain people not to teach false doctrines any longer 4 or to devote themselves to myths and endless genealogies. Such things promote controversial speculations rather than advancing God's work—which is by faith. 5 The goal of this command is love, which comes from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith. 6 Some have departed from these and have turned to meaningless talk. 7 They want to be teachers of the law, but they do not know what they are talking about or what they so confidently affirm." (1 Tim. 1:3-7)

Paul reminds Timothy that the Law is a good thing- a tool for correction and guidance, if used properly. In the hands of the sinful, the lawless, the greesy and the manipulators it can be used for evil purpose: *"We know that the law is good if one uses it properly. 9 We also know that the law is made not for the righteous but for lawbreakers and rebels, the ungodly and sinful, the unholy and irreligious, for those who kill their fathers or mothers, for murderers, 10 for the sexually immoral, for those practicing homosexuality, for slave traders and liars and perjurers—and for whatever else is contrary to the sound doctrine 11 that conforms to the gospel concerning the glory of the blessed God, which he entrusted to me."* (1 Tim. 1:8-11)

God's grace is amazingly powerful- it has the ability to bring men and women to the point of salvation, and it was the single force that brough Paul- once a persecutor- to faith in Christ: *"Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am the worst. 16 But for that very reason I was shown mercy so that in me, the worst of sinners, Christ Jesus might display his immense patience as an example for those who would believe in him and receive eternal life. 17 Now to the King eternal, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory for ever and ever. Amen."* (1 Tim. 1:15-17)

Having said all this, Paul reminds Timothy of the important charge that he has been given: *"Timothy, my son, I am giving you this command in keeping with the prophecies once made about you, so that by recalling them you may fight the battle well, 19 holding on to faith and a good conscience, which some have rejected and so have suffered shipwreck with regard to the faith. 20 Among them are Hymenaeus and Alexander, whom I have handed over to Satan to be taught not to blaspheme."* (1 Timothy 1:18-20). It is apparent from this passage that both the men named in verse 20 have been expelled from the church- in a sense excommunicated due to their heresies and constant disruptive behaviors. (http://biblehub.com/commentaries/1_timothy/1-20.htm)

Jeremiah 7-8 October 22, 2014 1 Timothy 2

The people, as we often are, were tempted to "hedge their bets" and worship God AND "all the other gods". God Himself, tought, made it very clear that this was (and is) unacceptable. Jesus said to us "You cannot serve God and money" (Matthew 6:24, Luke 16:13). We cannot serve TWO "gods"- God demands- and deserves- our complete devotion and worship. Anything other than this is sin or idolatry. God's people were so accustomed to having things their own way as far as worship went that their minds, hearts and souls were dulled to the truth. God tells them clearly

that this road they are on- an idolatrous one- leads only to destruction: *“This is the word that came to Jeremiah from the Lord: 2 “Stand at the gate of the Lord’s house and there proclaim this message: “‘Hear the word of the Lord, all you people of Judah who come through these gates to worship the Lord. 3 This is what the Lord Almighty, the God of Israel, says: Reform your ways and your actions, and I will let you live in this place. 4 Do not trust in deceptive words and say, “This is the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord!” 5 If you really change your ways and your actions and deal with each other justly, 6 if you do not oppress the foreigner, the fatherless or the widow and do not shed innocent blood in this place, and if you do not follow other gods to your own harm, 7 then I will let you live in this place, in the land I gave your ancestors for ever and ever. 8 But look, you are trusting in deceptive words that are worthless. 9 “‘Will you steal and murder, commit adultery and perjury,[a] burn incense to Baal and follow other gods you have not known, 10 and then come and stand before me in this house, which bears my Name, and say, “We are safe”—safe to do all these detestable things? 11 Has this house, which bears my Name, become a den of robbers to you? But I have been watching! declares the Lord.”* (Jer. 7:1-11). There is no room for Baal in God’s Temple- or anywhere! There is room only for the One true God.

God tells Jeremiah that the people have devoted themselves to the Queen of Heaven and they are beyond help: “So do not pray for this people nor offer any plea or petition for them; do not plead with me, for I will not listen to you. 17 Do you not see what they are doing in the towns of Judah and in the streets of Jerusalem? 18 The children gather wood, the fathers light the fire, and the women knead the dough and make cakes to offer to the Queen of Heaven. They pour out drink offerings to other gods to arouse my anger. 19 But am I the one they are provoking? declares the Lord. Are they not rather harming themselves, to their own shame? 20 “‘Therefore this is what the Sovereign Lord says: My anger and my wrath will be poured out on this place—on man and beast, on the trees of the field and on the crops of your land—and it will burn and not be quenched.” (Jer. 7:16-20).

God then reminds the people that He delivered them from Egypt and instituted the proper worship due Him at that time, but they are so “stiff necked” and stubborn that they cannot be persuaded short of dire punishment to change their ways: *“‘This is what the Lord Almighty, the God of Israel, says: Go ahead, add your burnt offerings to your other sacrifices and eat the meat yourselves! 22 For when I brought your ancestors out of Egypt and spoke to them, I did not just give them commands about burnt offerings and sacrifices, 23 but I gave them this command: Obey me, and I will be your God and you will be my people. Walk in obedience to all I command you, that it may go well with you. 24 But they did not listen or pay attention; instead, they followed the stubborn inclinations of their evil hearts. They went backward and not forward. 25 From the time your ancestors left Egypt until now, day after day, again and again I sent you my servants the prophets. 26 But they did not listen to me or pay attention. They were stiff-necked and did more evil than their ancestors.’ 27 “When you tell them all this, they will not listen to you; when you call to them, they will not answer. 28 Therefore say to them, ‘This is the nation that has not obeyed the Lord its God or responded to correction. Truth has perished; it has vanished from their lips. 29 “‘Cut off your hair and throw it away; take up a lament on the barren heights, for the Lord has rejected and abandoned this generation that is under his wrath.”* (Jer. 7:21-29)

The commentary tells us that “cutting off your hair” is a sign of both sorrow and slavery (http://biblehub.com/jeremiah/7-29.htm). The people have literally lost their freedom and have been enslaved to sin! Truth has literally “vanished from their lips” (verse 28).

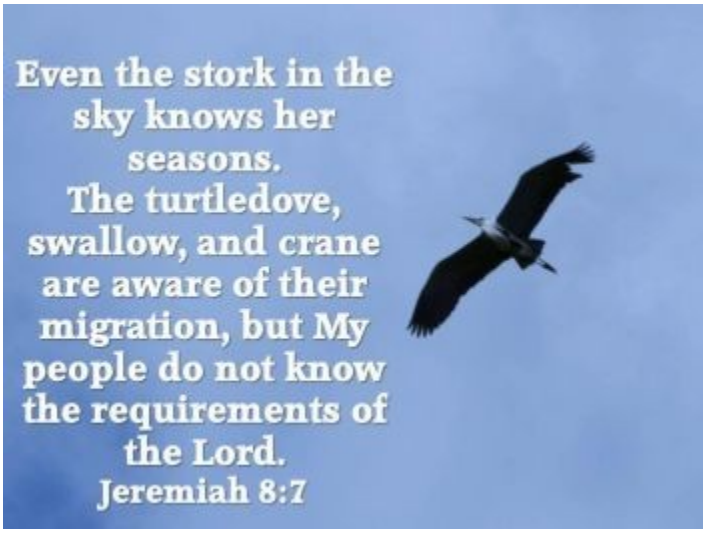
The people have committed several egregious sins- they have put idols in the very place of worship, they have scarificed their sons and daughters in the fire and have built the “high places of Topheth”. For these and other sins they will suffer greatly: *“‘The people of Judah have done evil in my eyes, declares the Lord. They have set up their detestable idols in the house that bears my Name and have defiled it. 31 They have built the high places of Topheth in the Valley of Ben Hinnom to burn their sons and daughters in the fire—something I did not command, nor did it enter my mind. 32 So beware, the days are coming, declares the Lord, when people will no longer call it Topheth or the Valley of Ben Hinnom, but the Valley of Slaughter, for they will bury the dead in Topheth until there is no more room. 33 Then the carcasses of this people will become food for the birds and the wild animals, and there will be no one to frighten them away. 34 I will bring an end to the sounds of joy and gladness and to the voices of bride and bridegroom in the towns of Judah and the streets of Jerusalem, for the land will become desolate.”* (Jer. 7:30-34)

Not only will laughter, joy and gladness cease in the land, but the very “bones of the kings and officials” and of the “priests and prophets” will be dug up and exposed to the elements in disgrace: *“‘At that time, declares the Lord, the bones of the kings and officials of Judah, the bones of the priests and prophets, and the bones of the people of Jerusalem will be removed from their graves. 2 They will be exposed to the sun and the moon and all the stars of the heavens, which they have loved and served and which they have followed and consulted and worshiped. They will not be gathered up or buried, but will be like dung lying on the ground. 3 Wherever I banish them, all the survivors of this evil nation will prefer death to life, declares the Lord Almighty.’* (Jer. 8:1-3). In a chilling note, the survivors of this devastation will “prefer death to life” (verse 3)

The people “turn away” from God, they are not even as aware as the stork who knows which way to go in the sky; they fall and do not “get up”: *“Say to them, ‘This is what the Lord says:*

“‘When people fall down, do they not get up?
When someone turns away, do they not return?
5 Why then have these people turned away?
Why does Jerusalem always turn away?
They cling to deceit;
they refuse to return.
6 I have listened attentively,
but they do not say what is right.
None of them repent of their wickedness,
saying, “What have I done?”
Each pursues their own course
like a horse charging into battle.

7 Even the stork in the sky
knows her appointed seasons,
and the dove, the swift and the thrush
observe the time of their migration.
But my people do not know
the requirements of the Lord." (Jer. 8:4-7)



http://www.examiner.com/topic/jeremiah

The minds and hearts of the people have become so dulled that they have no shame, they are unaware of the depth and depravity of their own sin. For this they will pay a great price. The awkwning from this "sleep" will be very painful for many:
"Are they ashamed of their detestable conduct?
No, they have no shame at all;
they do not even know how to blush.
So they will fall among the fallen;
they will be brought down when they are punished,
says the Lord.
13 "'I will take away their harvest,
declares the Lord.
There will be no grapes on the vine.
There will be no figs on the tree,
and their leaves will wither.
What I have given them
will be taken from them.'"
14 Why are we sitting here?
Gather together!
Let us flee to the fortified cities
and perish there!
For the Lord our God has doomed us to perish
and given us poisoned water to drink,
because we have sinned against him.
15 We hoped for peace

but no good has come,
for a time of healing
but there is only terror.
16 The snorting of the enemy's horses
is heard from Dan;
at the neighing of their stallions
the whole land trembles.
They have come to devour
the land and everything in it,
the city and all who live there.
17 "See, I will send venomous snakes among you,
vipers that cannot be charmed,
and they will bite you,"
declares the Lord." (Jer. 8:12-17).

God is sorrowful for the broken and fallen state of His people- His love for them has not ceased and He grieves that they have brought righteous judgment on themselves:

"You who are my Comforter[b] in sorrow,
my heart is faint within me.
19 Listen to the cry of my people
from a land far away:
"Is the Lord not in Zion?
Is her King no longer there?"
"Why have they aroused my anger with their images,
with their worthless foreign idols?"
20 "The harvest is past,
the summer has ended,
and we are not saved."
21 Since my people are crushed, I am crushed;
I mourn, and horror grips me.
22 Is there no balm in Gilead?
Is there no physician there?
Why then is there no healing
for the wound of my people?" (Jer. 8:18-22).

Is there no "balm in Gilead"? Why sre there no physicians to minister to the (self inflicted) wounds of the people? The "summer has ended and we are not saved"… what a mournful and sad commentary on the people of God!

1 Timothy 2

I must confess that one of the most difficult Scriptural commands for me is to "pray for those in authority" (Romans 13:1). The present federal administration in the US is to me rife with corruption, beholden to special interests and able and willing to buy votes with public funds. Why should I pray for "authorities" like these? It is just these kinds of people, though, that I should most be in prayer for! Who but God

could right the wrongs, open the eyes in enlightenment and change the hearts of those in authority over me? Paul says:
"I urge, then, first of all, that petitions, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving be made for all people— 2 for kings and all those in authority, that we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness. 3 This is good, and pleases God our Savior, 4 who wants all people to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth. 5 For there is one God and one mediator between God and mankind, the man Christ Jesus, 6 who gave himself as a ransom for all people. This has now been witnessed to at the proper time. 7 And for this purpose I was appointed a herald and an apostle—I am telling the truth, I am not lying—and a true and faithful teacher of the Gentiles. 8 Therefore I want the men everywhere to pray, lifting up holy hands without anger or disputing. 9 I also want the women to dress modestly, with decency and propriety, adorning themselves, not with elaborate hairstyles or gold or pearls or expensive clothes, 10 but with good deeds, appropriate for women who profess to worship God." (1 Tim. 2:1-10).

Note that Paul also addresses the issue of women dressing modestly, adorning themselves with good deeds rather than jewelry or expensive clothes. Paul was a realist- it is generally me who are most tempted visually, and modest dress and godly behavior is an aid in combatting sexual lust. Women are, of course, also tempted, but generally not the same way as men are. Thus there is no prohibition against men dressing immodestly, although common sense and humility would lead men to avoid this behavior.

Paul then jumps into an area that is a hornet's nest of controversy in this age and time- the issues of feminism and "proper" behavior for women. Let's look carefully at what Paul actually writes: *"A woman should learn in quietness and full submission. 12 I do not permit a woman to teach or to assume authority over a man; she must be quiet. 13 For Adam was formed first, then Eve. 14 And Adam was not the one deceived; it was the woman who was deceived and became a sinner. 15 But women will be saved through childbearing—if they continue in faith, love and holiness with propriety."* (1 Tim. 2:11-15) In the context of the culture in which these words were written, we see a great divide in the education (but not intelligence) and experience of woman and men. Women were generally not educated or experienced, and might ask questions "out loud" during a service of worship. In the interest of orderly worship, Paul urges women to "be quiet" (verse 12). This prohibition is similar to the one in Paul's letter to the church in Corinth: *"If they (women) want to inquire about something, they should ask their own husbands at home; for it is disgraceful for a woman to speak in the church."* (1 Cor. 14:35). Paul is not so much "anti woman" as "pro order"!

It is also very unpopular and controversial to suggest that it was the woman whom Satan deceived- one might point out that the man- Adam- readily accepted the woman's words and also ate of the forbidden fruit. Satan, however, clearly approached the woman first. Is this because Satan knows our weaknesses better than we do, and that he knew that the woman's intellect was "wired differently" than the man's? Recent research suggests that this may be so: http://www.medicalnewstoday.com/articles/269652.php. Very few persons will dare suggest that there is any difference at all in women and men, apart from the

obvious physical differences. However, the truth is the truth, and Satan both knew and used it to his advantage! I do confess that I don't understand how women will be saved theough childbearing. This is a question I will ask my Heavenly Father later. You may find this commentary helpful: http://www.desiringgod.org/blog/posts/how-are-women-saved-through-childbearing.

Jeremiah 9-10 October 23, 2014 1 Timothy 3

Jeremiah was often called the "weeping prophet". He was truly heartbroken about the state of affairs of his people, and his sorrow increased as he saw- from God's perspective through prophetic vision- how truly hopeless and helpless the people were. They were stubbornly clinging to evil, and refused to turn away from their pursuit of ungodliness. God's answer was to allow them to experience the consequences of their own disobedience:

"1 Oh, that my head were a spring of water
and my eyes a fountain of tears!
I would weep day and night
for the slain of my people.
2 Oh, that I had in the desert
a lodging place for travelers,
so that I might leave my people
and go away from them;
for they are all adulterers,
a crowd of unfaithful people." (Jer 9:1-2)

Their "triumph" is achieved only by lies and deception, they are convinced that their stubborn selfishness will go unchecked and unpunished:

"They make ready their tongue
like a bow, to shoot lies;
it is not by truth
that they triumph in the land.
They go from one sin to another;
they do not acknowledge me,"
declares the Lord.
4 "Beware of your friends;
do not trust anyone in your clan.
For every one of them is a deceiver,
and every friend a slanderer.
5 Friend deceives friend,
and no one speaks the truth.
They have taught their tongues to lie;
they weary themselves with sinning.
6 You live in the midst of deception;
in their deceit they refuse to acknowledge me,"
declares the Lord." (Jer. 9:3-6)

God's answer and solution to this is simple and straightforward- he will allow them to experience the consequences of their actions. He will remove His hand of protection from them, and their neighbors will be allowed to triumph over them:

"Therefore this is what the Lord Almighty says:
"See, I will refine and test them,
for what else can I do
because of the sin of my people?" (Jer. 9:7)

God then describes to Jeremiah in gruesome and vivid detail the woes that will be unleashed on these stubborn and unrelenting people. The punishment is not limited to Israel alone- God will also punish the "uncircumcised nations" as well (verse 26):

"The Lord said, "It is because they have forsaken my law, which I set before them; they have not obeyed me or followed my law. 14 Instead, they have followed the stubbornness of their hearts; they have followed the Baals, as their ancestors taught them." 15 Therefore this is what the Lord Almighty, the God of Israel, says: "See, I will make this people eat bitter food and drink poisoned water. 16 I will scatter them among nations that neither they nor their ancestors have known, and I will pursue them with the sword until I have made an end of them."

17 This is what the Lord Almighty says:

"Consider now! Call for the wailing women to come;
send for the most skillful of them.
18 Let them come quickly
and wail over us
till our eyes overflow with tears
and water streams from our eyelids.
19 The sound of wailing is heard from Zion:
'How ruined we are!
How great is our shame!
We must leave our land
because our houses are in ruins.'"
20 Now, you women, hear the word of the Lord;
open your ears to the words of his mouth.
Teach your daughters how to wail;
teach one another a lament.
21 Death has climbed in through our windows
and has entered our fortresses;
it has removed the children from the streets
and the young men from the public squares.
22 Say, "This is what the Lord declares:

"'Dead bodies will lie
like dung on the open field,
like cut grain behind the reaper,
with no one to gather them.'"
23 This is what the Lord says:

“Let not the wise boast of their wisdom
or the strong boast of their strength
or the rich boast of their riches,
24 but let the one who boasts boast about this:
that they have the understanding to know me,
that I am the Lord, who exercises kindness,
justice and righteousness on earth,
for in these I delight,”
declares the Lord.
25 “The days are coming,” declares the Lord, “when I will punish all who are circumcised only in the flesh— 26 Egypt, Judah, Edom, Ammon, Moab and all who live in the wilderness in distant places. For all these nations are really uncircumcised, and even the whole house of Israel is uncircumcised in heart.” (Jer 9:13-26)

God seems to hold out at least a small hope for His people, for he then instructs them – again- as to the differences between Himself and the idols which they are so eager to worship:
“Hear what the Lord says to you, people of Israel. 2 This is what the Lord says:

“Do not learn the ways of the nations
or be terrified by signs in the heavens,
though the nations are terrified by them.
3 For the practices of the peoples are worthless;
they cut a tree out of the forest,
and a craftsman shapes it with his chisel.
4 They adorn it with silver and gold;
they fasten it with hammer and nails
so it will not totter.
5 Like a scarecrow in a cucumber field,
their idols cannot speak;
they must be carried
because they cannot walk.
Do not fear them;
they can do no harm
nor can they do any good.”
6 No one is like you, Lord;
you are great,
and your name is mighty in power.” (Jer 10:1-6)
God explaind that these “gods” did not- and could not- create the earth and all that is in it- they are perishable, He alone is imperishable:
“Tell them this: ‘These gods, who did not make the heavens and the earth, will perish from the earth and from under the heavens.’”
12 But God made the earth by his power;
he founded the world by his wisdom

and stretched out the heavens by his understanding.
13 When he thunders, the waters in the heavens roar;
he makes clouds rise from the ends of the earth.
He sends lightning with the rain
and brings out the wind from his storehouses.
14 Everyone is senseless and without knowledge;
every goldsmith is shamed by his idols.
The images he makes are a fraud;
they have no breath in them.
15 They are worthless, the objects of mockery;
when their judgment comes, they will perish." (Jer. 10:11-15)

Because His people did not realize all this, a terrible time is coming, in which the people will begin to realize the seriousness and depth of their sin in abandoning their God:

"Gather up your belongings to leave the land,
you who live under siege.
18 For this is what the Lord says:
"At this time I will hurl out
those who live in this land;
I will bring distress on them
so that they may be captured."
19 Woe to me because of my injury!
My wound is incurable!
Yet I said to myself,
"This is my sickness, and I must endure it."
20 My tent is destroyed;
all its ropes are snapped.
My children are gone from me and are no more;
no one is left now to pitch my tent
or to set up my shelter.
21 The shepherds are senseless
and do not inquire of the Lord;
so they do not prosper
and all their flock is scattered.
22 Listen! The report is coming—
a great commotion from the land of the north!
It will make the towns of Judah desolate,
a haunt of jackals." (Jer. 10:17-22)

The Jeremiah prays in intercession for his people, asking God to discipline him and not the people, and to pour out His wrath on the ungodly nations and not on His very people:

"Lord, I know that people's lives are not their own;
it is not for them to direct their steps.
24 Discipline me, Lord, but only in due measure—
not in your anger,
or you will reduce me to nothing.

25 Pour out your wrath on the nations
that do not acknowledge you,
on the peoples who do not call on your name.
For they have devoured Jacob;
they have devoured him completely
and destroyed his homeland." (Jer. 10:23-25)

Verse 23 almost sounds like Jeremiah is "excusing" his people, reminding God that they do not "direct their steps". However, the truth is that their abandonment of God is by their own free choice- and this choice must be allowed to reach spiritual and literal consequences!

1 Timothy 3

Another "trustworthy" statement- perhaps to be paired up with the one in 1 Timothy 1:15- this one about those chosen to lead the church. The qualifications for deacon and elder are fairly specific. The only difficulty I have ever had with qualifications for either office is the requirement that a man (yes, this assumes that only the male gender will hold the office) must be the husband of *"one wife"* (1 Tim. 3:2 ESV): *"Here is a trustworthy saying: Whoever aspires to be an overseer desires a noble task. 2 Now the overseer is to be above reproach, faithful to his wife, temperate, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, 3 not given to drunkenness, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, not a lover of money. 4 He must manage his own family well and see that his children obey him, and he must do so in a manner worthy of full[a] respect. 5 (If anyone does not know how to manage his own family, how can he take care of God's church?) 6 He must not be a recent convert, or he may become conceited and fall under the same judgment as the devil. 7 He must also have a good reputation with outsiders, so that he will not fall into disgrace and into the devil's trap.8 In the same way, deacons are to be worthy of respect, sincere, not indulging in much wine, and not pursuing dishonest gain. 9 They must keep hold of the deep truths of the faith with a clear conscience. 10 They must first be tested; and then if there is nothing against them, let them serve as deacons. 11 In the same way, the women are to be worthy of respect, not malicious talkers but temperate and trustworthy in everything. 12 A deacon must be faithful to his wife and must manage his children and his household well. 13 Those who have served well gain an excellent standing and great assurance in their faith in Christ Jesus."* (1 Tim. 3:1-13)

The NIV translation, which I have used almost exclusively in this journal, renders the verse "faithful to his wife". The reason this is of any personal interest to me is that I desired to serve as an "overseer" (elder or bishop) in a local PCA church. I was ruled "not qualified" since I had been divorced and remarried, even though I was always "faithful" to my wife (NIV)! Please also see http://www.9marks.org/journal/biblical-qualifications-and-responsibilities-deacons. The deacon's primary role is the physical and logistical needs of the church members, whereas the elder "overseer" has a primary role in the spiritual leadership of the church.

Paul is writing primarily as a substitute for his physical presence with Timothy. He closes this section of the letter with a beautiful poem/prayer:

"Although I hope to come to you soon, I am writing you these instructions so that, 15 if I am delayed, you will know how people ought to conduct themselves in God's household, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and foundation of the truth. 16 Beyond all question, the mystery from which true godliness springs is great:

He appeared in the flesh,
was vindicated by the Spirit,
was seen by angels,
was preached among the nations,
was believed on in the world,
was taken up in glory." (1 Tim. 3:14-16)

https://www.memverse.com/blog/main/last-quiz-before-local-bible-bees?page=2

Jeremiah 11-13 October 24, 2014 1 Timothy 4

The covenant has now been broken. God reminds His people again that he initiated a covenant with them after leading them out of the “furnace” of Egypt, but they have been willfully and consistently disobedient to the trms of this covenant. The consequences of disobedience will now be visited on them and God refuses to listen to their pleas: *“This is the word that came to Jeremiah from the Lord: 2 “Listen to the terms of this covenant and tell them to the people of Judah and to those who live in Jerusalem. 3 Tell them that this is what the Lord, the God of Israel, says: ‘Cursed is the one who does not obey the terms of this covenant— 4 the terms I commanded your ancestors when I brought them out of Egypt, out of the iron-smelting furnace.’ I said, ‘Obey me and do everything I command you, and you will be my people, and I will be your God. 5 Then I will fulfill the oath I swore to your ancestors, to give them a land flowing with milk and honey’—the land you possess today.” I answered, “Amen, Lord.”*

6 The Lord said to me, “Proclaim all these words in the towns of Judah and in the streets of Jerusalem: ‘Listen to the terms of this covenant and follow them. 7 From the time I brought your ancestors up from Egypt until today, I warned them again and again, saying, “Obey me.” 8 But they did not listen or pay attention; instead, they followed the stubbornness of their evil hearts. So I brought on them all the curses of the covenant I had commanded them to follow but that they did not keep.’” 9 Then the Lord said to me, “There is a conspiracy among the people of Judah and those who live in Jerusalem. 10 They have returned to the sins of their ancestors, who refused to listen to my words. They have followed other gods to serve them. Both Israel and Judah have broken the covenant I made with their ancestors. 11 Therefore this is what the Lord says: ‘I will bring on them a disaster they cannot escape. Although they cry out to me, I will not listen to them. 12 The towns of Judah and the people of Jerusalem will go and cry out to the gods to whom they burn incense, but they will not help them at all when disaster strikes. 13 You, Judah, have as many gods as you have towns; and the altars you have set up to burn incense to that shameful god Baal are as many as the streets of Jerusalem.’ 14 “Do not pray for this people or offer any plea or petition for them, because I will not listen when they call to me in the time of their distress.” (Jer. 11:1-14)
It is interesting to me that God would use the image of an “iron smelting furnace” (verse 4) for their time in Egypt. Typically a furnace is used as a symbol of purification by fire or intense heat, and it is not clear that the people were “purified” in any way by their experience in captivity- God did promise that they would be in a land of “milk and honey” (another frequwntly used image) when they finally reached the Land promised to them. Instead of gratitude and true devotion and worship, the people “rewarded” God with disobedience, indifference and superficial worship. Now the time has come for the consequence of their grievous sin toward their God!

The very place they should be closest to God in worship is the place that they have desecrated with their sin and worship of “gods” their ancestors did not know:
“What is my beloved doing in my temple
as she, with many others, works out her evil schemes?
Can consecrated meat avert your punishment?
When you engage in your wickedness,
then you rejoice.”

16 The Lord called you a thriving olive tree
with fruit beautiful in form.
But with the roar of a mighty storm
he will set it on fire,
and its branches will be broken.
17 The Lord Almighty, who planted you, has decreed disaster for you, because the people of both Israel and Judah have done evil and aroused my anger by burning incense to Baal." (Jer. 11:15-17)

So angry were some of the people- in particular the people of Anathoth- that they plotted against Jeremiah to kill him. Jeremiah was apparently unaware of this plot until the Lord revealed it to him. The Lord then promised to avenge Jeremiah for this evil plot against him:
"Because the Lord revealed their plot to me, I knew it, for at that time he showed me what they were doing. 19 I had been like a gentle lamb led to the slaughter; I did not realize that they had plotted against me, saying,

"Let us destroy the tree and its fruit;
let us cut him off from the land of the living,
that his name be remembered no more."
20 But you, Lord Almighty, who judge righteously
and test the heart and mind,
let me see your vengeance on them,
for to you I have committed my cause.
21 Therefore this is what the Lord says about the people of Anathoth who are threatening to kill you, saying, "Do not prophesy in the name of the Lord or you will die by our hands"— 22 therefore this is what the Lord Almighty says: "I will punish them. Their young men will die by the sword, their sons and daughters by famine. 23 Not even a remnant will be left to them, because I will bring disaster on the people of Anathoth in the year of their punishment." (Jer. 11:18-23)

Perhaps out of disillusionment with his precarious position and the death threat he has just escaped, Jeremiah questions God's very righteousness. Why does he allow such evil in the world. The Psalmist asked a similar question: *"Why do the heathen rage"* (Psalm 2:1 KJV) or in the NIV translation:
"Why do the nations conspire
and the peoples plot in vain?
2 The kings of the earth rise up
and the rulers band together
against the Lord and against his anointed, saying,
3 "Let us break their chains
and throw off their shackles." (Psalm 2:1-3)

Jeremiah questions the Lord:
"You are always righteous, Lord,
when I bring a case before you.
Yet I would speak with you about your justice:
Why does the way of the wicked prosper?
Why do all the faithless live at ease?
2 You have planted them, and they have taken root;

they grow and bear fruit.
You are always on their lips
but far from their hearts.
3 Yet you know me, Lord;
you see me and test my thoughts about you.
Drag them off like sheep to be butchered!
Set them apart for the day of slaughter!
4 How long will the land lie parched
and the grass in every field be withered?
Because those who live in it are wicked,
the animals and birds have perished.
Moreover, the people are saying,
"He will not see what happens to us." (Jer. 12:1-4)

God's answer is both swift and sure- He will allow the conqueror to have his way with Israel:
"Over all the barren heights in the desert
destroyers will swarm,
for the sword of the Lord will devour
from one end of the land to the other;
no one will be safe.
13 They will sow wheat but reap thorns;
they will wear themselves out but gain nothing.
They will bear the shame of their harvest
because of the Lord's fierce anger." (Jer. 12:12-13)
.
God must enjoy graphic illustrations- literally 'acting out" by a prophet and other representative so that the people can see what the "real picture" looks like to God. In a fashion similar to that used with Hosea who married the prostitute Gomer, Ezekiel lying on his side, Isaiah appearing naked and barefooted (see http://rsc.byu.edu/archived/sperry-symposium-classics-old-testament/symbolic-action-prophecy-old-testament), Jeremiah takes a linen belt and leaves it "in the open". When he returns the belt is ruined and useless: *"This is what the Lord said to me: "Go and buy a linen belt and put it around your waist, but do not let it touch water." 2 So I bought a belt, as the Lord directed, and put it around my waist. 3 Then the word of the Lord came to me a second time: 4 "Take the belt you bought and are wearing around your waist, and go now to Perath[d] and hide it there in a crevice in the rocks." 5 So I went and hid it at Perath, as the Lord told me. 6 Many days later the Lord said to me, "Go now to Perath and get the belt I told you to hide there." 7 So I went to Perath and dug up the belt and took it from the place where I had hidden it, but now it was ruined and completely useless. 8 Then the word of the Lord came to me: 9 "This is what the Lord says: 'In the same way I will ruin the pride of Judah and the great pride of Jerusalem. 10 These wicked people, who refuse to*

listen to my words, who follow the stubbornness of their hearts and go after other gods to serve and worship them, will be like this belt—completely useless! 11 For as a belt is bound around the waist, so I bound all the people of Israel and all the people of Judah to me,' declares the Lord, 'to be my people for my renown and praise and honor. But they have not listened.'" (Jer. 13:1-11)

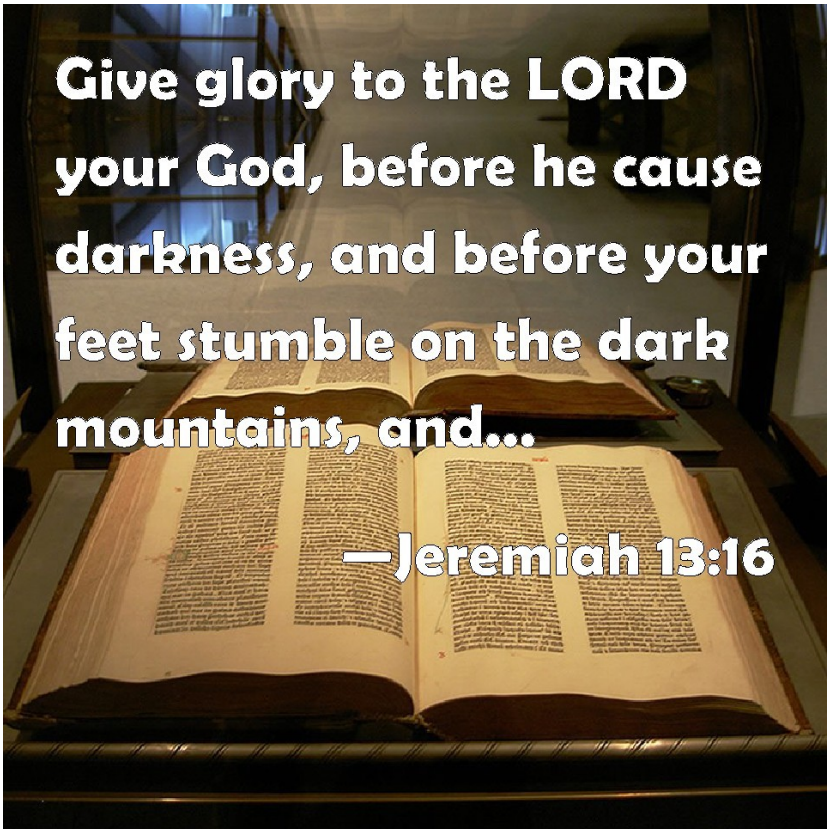
God also promises that those who are now "drunk with power" will become intoxicated and confused, and destroy each other- all at the Lord's hand: "Say to them: 'This is what the Lord, the God of Israel, says: Every wineskin should be filled with wine.' And if they say to you, 'Don't we know that every wineskin should be filled with wine?' 13 then tell them, 'This is what the Lord says: I am going to fill with drunkenness all who live in this land, including the kings who sit on David's throne, the priests, the prophets and all those living in Jerusalem. 14 I will smash them one against the other, parents and children alike, declares the Lord. I will allow no pity or mercy or compassion to keep me from destroying them.'"(Jer. 13:12-14)

And finally God declares that He will put them in captivity and scatter them over the earth. This prophesy was completely fulfilled in the Diaspora, when the Jews were overcome by Rome and "scattered to the nations", losing for centuries their homeland and an important part of their identity as God's chosen people (see http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jewish_diaspora). This first phase of the "scattering" was now about to take place:

"Hear and pay attention,
do not be arrogant,
for the Lord has spoken.
16 Give glory to the Lord your God
before he brings the darkness,
before your feet stumble
on the darkening hills.
You hope for light,
but he will turn it to utter darkness
and change it to deep gloom.
17 If you do not listen,
I will weep in secret
because of your pride;
my eyes will weep bitterly,
overflowing with tears,
because the Lord's flock will be taken captive.
18 Say to the king and to the queen mother,
"Come down from your thrones,
for your glorious crowns
will fall from your heads."
19 The cities in the Negev will be shut up,
and there will be no one to open them.
All Judah will be carried into exile,
carried completely away.
20 Look up and see
those who are coming from the north.
Where is the flock that was entrusted to you,
the sheep of which you boasted?

21 What will you say when the Lord sets over you
    those you cultivated as your special allies?
Will not pain grip you
    like that of a woman in labor?
22 And if you ask yourself,
    “Why has this happened to me?”—
it is because of your many sins
    that your skirts have been torn off
    and your body mistreated.
23 Can an Ethiopian change his skin
    or a leopard its spots?
Neither can you do good
    who are accustomed to doing evil.
24 “I will scatter you like chaff
    driven by the desert wind.
25 This is your lot,
    the portion I have decreed for you,”
declares the Lord,
“because you have forgotten me
    and trusted in false gods.” (Jer 13:15-25).

This passage, incidentally, is the origin of the question “Can a leopard change its spots?” (verse 23). God’s reason for this tragic dispersal is very plain and simple- “because you have forgotten Me and trusted in false gods” (verse 25) Woe to my beloved America if she ever does the same!



http://biblepic.com/jeremiah/13-16.htm#.VE__K3ktDIU

1 Timothy 4

The last days…they are prophesied- they are coming? And what shall we do? How shall we ready ourselves…are we "prayed up" and ready? These are questions that have always been at the center of our looking ahead to the Lord's coming. Unfortunately, evil persons use our concerns, our fears, and even our misconceptions to lead us into places and states of mind that we should not enter. Such was the case in the first century church, when many believed- understandable- that Jesus' return- the Second Coming- was imminent! Paul explains how the believer should handle such issues: *"The Spirit clearly says that in later times some will abandon the faith and follow deceiving spirits and things taught by demons. 2 Such teachings come through hypocritical liars, whose consciences have been seared as with a hot iron. 3 They forbid people to marry and order them to abstain from certain foods, which God created to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and who know the truth. 4 For everything God created is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving, 5 because it is consecrated by the word of God and prayer. 6 If you point these things out to the brothers and sisters, you will be a good minister of Christ Jesus, nourished on the truths of the faith and of the good teaching that you have followed. 7 Have nothing to do with godless myths and old wives' tales; rather, train yourself to be godly. 8 For physical training is of some value, but godliness has value for all things, holding promise for both the present life and the life to come. 9 This is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance. 10 That is why we labor and strive, because*

we have put our hope in the living God, who is the Savior of all people, and especially of those who believe." (1 Tim. 4:1-10)

Notice that the authority and source of this teaching- the very Spirit of God (verse 1). The teachings described that should be avoided and discounted are produced by "hypocritical liars" (verse 2) and in some cases by demons themselves (verse 1). These teachings clearly go against the "whole counsel of God" (Acts 20:27) in that they prescribe that marriage be forbidden and certain foods be avoided (verse 3). This is of course contrary to some of the first teachings of Scripture, when God created the heavens and earth and pronounced them to be "good" (Gen. 1:9,11,17,21,25 or "very good"- 31)

Paul then gives Timothy some personal counsel- 1) don't worry that some may discount you because you are young (verse 12); 2) set a good example with your whole life (verse 12); 3) continue to read the Scripture in public, and to preach and teach; 4) don't neglect your gift of prophecy; and 5) to be diligent and persevere. Wonderful advice for a gifted and growing young Christian leader: *"Command and teach these things. 12 Don't let anyone look down on you because you are young, but set an example for the believers in speech, in conduct, in love, in faith and in purity. 13 Until I come, devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture, to preaching and to teaching. 14 Do not neglect your gift, which was given you through prophecy when the body of elders laid their hands on you. 15 Be diligent in these matters; give yourself wholly to them, so that everyone may see your progress. 16 Watch your life and doctrine closely. Persevere in them, because if you do, you will save both yourself and your hearers."* (1 Tim. 4:11-16)

Jeremiah 14-16 October 25, 2014 1 Timothy 5

What could be worse in an arid and desert land than drought? When water is available, the land of Israel is productive- very productive. Seasons of drought change the picture drastically. God allowed a long drought to occur- perhaps to show His people that he alone is the giver of life. The suffering was terrible, and Jeremiah pleaded with God to relent and send rain:
"This is the word of the Lord that came to Jeremiah concerning the drought:

2 "Judah mourns,
her cities languish;
they wail for the land,
and a cry goes up from Jerusalem.
3 The nobles send their servants for water;
they go to the cisterns
but find no water.
They return with their jars unfilled;
dismayed and despairing,
they cover their heads.
4 The ground is cracked
because there is no rain in the land;
the farmers are dismayed
and cover their heads.
5 Even the doe in the field

deserts her newborn fawn
because there is no grass.
6 Wild donkeys stand on the barren heights
and pant like jackals;
their eyes fail
for lack of food."
7 Although our sins testify against us,
do something, Lord, for the sake of your name.
For we have often rebelled;
we have sinned against you." (Jer. 14:1-7)

The people ple to God through Jeremiah, even though they are beginning to realize and understand the depth and offensiveness of their sins:

"You who are the hope of Israel,
its Savior in times of distress,
why are you like a stranger in the land,
like a traveler who stays only a night?
9 Why are you like a man taken by surprise,
like a warrior powerless to save?
You are among us, Lord,
and we bear your name;
do not forsake us!" (Jer. 14:8-9)

God refuses to hear or honor their prayers for deliverance. He has had enough of their sinful ways, and warns them that those who speak about relief and an end to the suffering are false prophets. They were not chosen by God, and do not speak for Him:

"Then the Lord said to me, "Do not pray for the well-being of this people. 12 Although they fast, I will not listen to their cry; though they offer burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them. Instead, I will destroy them with the sword, famine and plague."
13 But I said, "Alas, Sovereign Lord! The prophets keep telling them, 'You will not see the sword or suffer famine. Indeed, I will give you lasting peace in this place.'"
14 Then the Lord said to me, "The prophets are prophesying lies in my name. I have not sent them or appointed them or spoken to them. They are prophesying to you false visions, divinations, idolatries[a] and the delusions of their own minds. 15 Therefore this is what the Lord says about the prophets who are prophesying in my name: I did not send them, yet they are saying, 'No sword or famine will touch this land.' Those same prophets will perish by sword and famine. 16 And the people they are prophesying to will be thrown out into the streets of Jerusalem because of the famine and sword. There will be no one to bury them, their wives, their sons and their daughters. I will pour out on them the calamity they deserve.
17 "Speak this word to them:
"'Let my eyes overflow with tears
night and day without ceasing;
for the Virgin Daughter, my people,
has suffered a grievous wound,
a crushing blow.
18 If I go into the country,
I see those slain by the sword;
if I go into the city,
I see the ravages of famine.

Both prophet and priest
have gone to a land they know not.’” (Jer. 14:11-18)

The last minute, desperate, “I’m sorry only that I have been caught” pleas of the people are too little and too late. Only when the people are suffering do they realize something is wrong. Their spiritual dullness is so great that great pain is required to bring them back to reality:

“Have you rejected Judah completely?
Do you despise Zion?
Why have you afflicted us
so that we cannot be healed?
We hoped for peace
but no good has come,
for a time of healing
but there is only terror.
20 We acknowledge our wickedness, Lord,
and the guilt of our ancestors;
we have indeed sinned against you.
21 For the sake of your name do not despise us;
do not dishonor your glorious throne.
Remember your covenant with us
and do not break it.
22 Do any of the worthless idols of the nations bring rain?
Do the skies themselves send down showers?
No, it is you, Lord our God.
Therefore our hope is in you,
for you are the one who does all this.” (Jer. 14:19-22)

Then God says something truly chilling to those who have “ears to hear” (Matthew 11:15; 13:9; Mark 4:9; Rev. 3:22) - He is tired of “holding back” (verse 6) and He will unleash His righteous anger on these people who dishonor Him with their very lives:

“Then the Lord said to me: “Even if Moses and Samuel were to stand before me, my heart would not go out to this people. Send them away from my presence! Let them go! 2 And if they ask you, ‘Where shall we go?’ tell them, ‘This is what the Lord says:

“‘Those destined for death, to death;
those for the sword, to the sword;
those for starvation, to starvation;
those for captivity, to captivity.’
3 “I will send four kinds of destroyers against them,” declares the Lord, “the sword to kill and the dogs to drag away and the birds and the wild animals to devour and destroy. 4 I will make them abhorrent to all the kingdoms of the earth because of what Manasseh son of Hezekiah king of Judah did in Jerusalem.

5 “Who will have pity on you, Jerusalem?
Who will mourn for you?
Who will stop to ask how you are?
6 You have rejected me,” declares the Lord.
“You keep on backsliding.
So I will reach out and destroy you;
I am tired of holding back.” (Jer. 15:1-6)

Jeremiah then pleads for his own life, reminding God that these very people are the ones who plotted against him because of his faithful witness to God. And God gives Jeremiah assurances that he will be saved and protected- God still has plans for Jeremiah and will eventually provide hope for His people- after they have endured some of th consequences of their sins. The people are simply not ready to receive hope, simply because they are not truly repentant and willing to change rather than complain and cry out to God:

“Lord, you understand;
remember me and care for me.
Avenge me on my persecutors.
You are long-suffering—do not take me away;
think of how I suffer reproach for your sake.
16 When your words came, I ate them;
they were my joy and my heart’s delight,
for I bear your name,
Lord God Almighty.
17 I never sat in the company of revelers,
never made merry with them;
I sat alone because your hand was on me
and you had filled me with indignation.
18 Why is my pain unending
and my wound grievous and incurable?
You are to me like a deceptive brook,
like a spring that fails.
19 Therefore this is what the Lord says:

“If you repent, I will restore you
that you may serve me;
if you utter worthy, not worthless, words,
you will be my spokesman.
Let this people turn to you,
but you must not turn to them.
20 I will make you a wall to this people,
a fortified wall of bronze;
they will fight against you
but will not overcome you,
for I am with you
to rescue and save you,”
declares the Lord.
21 “I will save you from the hands of the wicked
and deliver you from the grasp of the cruel.” (Jer 15:15-21)

God forbids Jeremiah to marry of have children or to show sympathy over the dead among the people, and not to offer comfort or participate in fasting. These people who have left God’s care and gone after other gods must see and experience the dire consequences of their profounfd disobedience: *“Then the word of the Lord came to me: 2 “You must not marry and have sons or daughters in this place.” 3 For this is what the Lord says about the sons and daughters born in this land and about the women who are their mothers and the men who are their fathers: 4 “They will die of deadly diseases. They will not be mourned or buried but will be like dung lying on the ground. They will perish by sword and famine, and their dead bodies will*

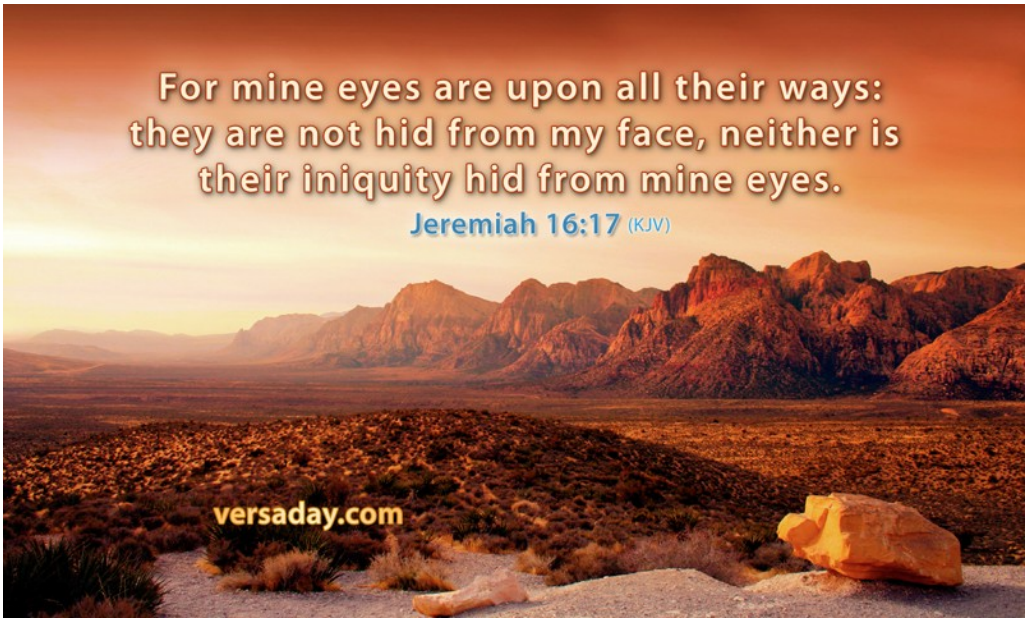
become food for the birds and the wild animals.” 5 For this is what the Lord says: “Do not enter a house where there is a funeral meal; do not go to mourn or show sympathy, because I have withdrawn my blessing, my love and my pity from this people,” declares the Lord. 6 “Both high and low will die in this land. They will not be buried or mourned, and no one will cut themselves or shave their head for the dead. 7 No one will offer food to comfort those who mourn for the dead—not even for a father or a mother—nor will anyone give them a drink to console them. 8 “And do not enter a house where there is feasting and sit down to eat and drink. 9 For this is what the Lord Almighty, the God of Israel, says: Before your eyes and in your days I will bring an end to the sounds of joy and gladness and to the voices of bride and bridegroom in this place.” (Jer 16:1-9)

God, who has a reason and a purpose for everything, instructs Jeremiah to answer the questions from the people about this great suffering in this way:
10 “When you tell these people all this and they ask you, ‘Why has the Lord decreed such a great disaster against us? What wrong have we done? What sin have we committed against the Lord our God?’ 11 then say to them, ‘It is because your ancestors forsook me,’ declares the Lord, ‘and followed other gods and served and worshiped them. They forsook me and did not keep my law. 12 But you have behaved more wickedly than your ancestors. See how all of you are following the stubbornness of your evil hearts instead of obeying me. 13 So I will throw you out of this land into a land neither you nor your ancestors have known, and there you will serve other gods day and night, for I will show you no favor.’(Jer 16:10-13)

The answers to these questions should not have been a “surprise” to the people. Their idolatry and spiritual dullness, though, had rendered them incapable of true worship and right relationship- they had gone their won way for so long that they had almost forgotten the God they once loved and served with gladness. The formula was simple- they forgot God, refused to follow His directions, commands and counsel, and had gone after other gods- the gods of the pagan peoples around them. God is not finished with them- there is still hope for repentance and a return to His ways: *“However, the days are coming,” declares the LORD, “when it will no longer be said, ‘As surely as the LORD lives, who brought the Israelites up out of Egypt,’ 15 but it will be said, ‘As surely as the LORD lives, who brought the Israelites up out of the land of the north and out of all the countries where he had banished them.’ For I will restore them to the land I gave their ancestors.”* (Jer. 16:14-15)

Before the restoration of the people there will be a time of sorrow, pain and dire consequence. Such is the immutable equation of the spirit- the one deep in sin must experience the reality of the sin, the quality of sin that leads to death- either spiritual or physical, before the life that comes from God can be fully realized, appreciated, and put back into the center of one’s life:
“But now I will send for many fishermen,” declares the LORD, “and they will catch them.After that I will send for many hunters, and they will hunt them down on every mountain and hill and from the crevices of the rocks. 17 My eyes are on all their ways; they are not hidden from me, nor is their sin concealed from my eyes. 18 I will repay them double for their wickedness and their sin, because they have defiled my land with the lifeless forms of their vile images and have filled my inheritance with their detestable idols.”
19 LORD, my strength and my fortress,

my refuge in time of distress,
to you the nations will come
from the ends of the earth and say,
“Our ancestors possessed nothing but false gods,
worthless idols that did them no good.
20 Do people make their own gods?
Yes, but they are not gods!”
21 “Therefore I will teach them—
this time I will teach them
my power and might.
Then they will know
that my name is the LORD.” (Jer 16:16-21)
The reason for the suffering- so that they, my people, “will know that my name is the Lord”!



https://versaday.com/Months/11/1124.aspx

1 Timothy 5

The church is made up of real people with real problems, and these problems and issues require real solutions. There is a tendency among some believers to “spiritualize” everything, to substitute “good feelings” and “warm fuzzy prayers” for real concern and involvement. The main problem with this approach is that it is not realistic and doesn’t demonstrate real concern for people’s needs. Suppose Jesus had said to the multitudes, after preaching all day in a remote place “Be of good cheer- I know that you will find food, lodging and rest somewhere- have a nice evening” This is similar to what Jesus’ disciples had suggested “As evening approached, the disciples came to him and said, “This is a remote place, and it’s already getting late. Send the crowds away, so they can go to the villages and buy themselves some food.” (Matthew 14:15) What did Jesus actually do in response to this real need? He said: *“They do not need to go away. You give them something to eat.” 17 “We have here only five loaves of bread and two fish,” they answered. 18*

“Bring them here to me,” he said. 19 And he directed the people to sit down on the grass. Taking the five loaves and the two fish and looking up to heaven, he gave thanks and broke the loaves. Then he gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the people. 20 They all ate and were satisfied, and the disciples picked up twelve basketfuls of broken pieces that were left over. 21 The number of those who ate was about five thousand men, besides women and children.” (Matthew 14:16b-21) And Jesus took their “little offering”, their small but real response and multiplied it to feed many!

Paul is aware of the real needs of the church, and in this section of his letter to Timothy addresses seral real issues: 1) how to treat one another without regard to age; 2) the care and proper treatment of widows- including a definition of those widows ewho are truly in need of care from the church; 3) the place of elders, both as to honoring their calling and disciplining those who sin, and 4) some practical comments on “laying on of hands”, eating and drinking.

First the issue of how to trat the elderly and the young: *“Do not rebuke an older man harshly, but exhort him as if he were your father. Treat younger men as brothers, 2 older women as mothers, and younger women as sisters, with absolute purity.”* (1 Tim. 5:1-2). Then the thorny issue of widows came up. A widow in that day was in a truly precarious position, she had no husband to provide for her and her children; she was typically not as educated as a man and was not regarded as the equal of a man in many ways. Paul says this*: “Give proper recognition to those widows who are really in need. 4 But if a widow has children or grandchildren, these should learn first of all to put their religion into practice by caring for their own family and so repaying their parents and grandparents, for this is pleasing to God. 5 The widow who is really in need and left all alone puts her hope in God and continues night and day to pray and to ask God for help. 6 But the widow who lives for pleasure is dead even while she lives. 7 Give the people these instructions, so that no one may be open to blame. 8 Anyone who does not provide for their relatives, and especially for their own household, has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever.”* (1 Tim. 5:3-8). The key phrase here is “really in need” (verse 3). Those widows who have family to care for them should be cared for by theor own families. Not to do so, says Paul, is disgraceful and these uncaring actions are worse than those expected from an unveliever (verse 8)

As to the office and conduct of elders, Paul gives these instructions: *“The elders who direct the affairs of the church well are worthy of double honor, especially those whose work is preaching and teaching. 18 For Scripture says, “Do not muzzle an ox while it is treading out the grain,” and “The worker deserves his wages.”19 Do not entertain an accusation against an elder unless it is brought by two or three witnesses. 20 But those elders who are sinning you are to reprove before everyone, so that the others may take warning. 21 I charge you, in the sight of God and Christ Jesusand the elect angels, to keep these instructions without partiality, and to do nothing out of favoritism.”* (1 Tim. 5:17-21) If elders are treated differently that others in the body of believers, then there is inevitable trouble, division and feelings of “favoritism” that can literally tear the church apart. We must always be mindful of, and working toward, unity and harmony in the church.

Finally a few practical pieces of advice and counsel: *"Do not be hasty in the laying on of hands, and do not share in the sins of others. Keep yourself pure. 23 Stop drinking only water, and use a little wine because of your stomach and your frequent illnesses. 24 The sins of some are obvious, reaching the place of judgment ahead of them; the sins of others trail behind them. 25 In the same way, good deeds are obvious, and even those that are not obvious cannot remain hidden forever."* (1 Tim. 5:22-25). The commentary on verse 22 is very helpful. The office of elder (which would require laying on of hands) should not be offered or entered into carelessly or without serious examination and soul searching of the candidate. Please see (http://biblehub.com/commentaries/1_timothy/5-22.htm) The persistence of sin is alluded to in verse 24, as well as the persistence of "good deeds". Both are a witness- one positive and one negative!

Jeremiah 17-19 October 26. 2014 1 Timothy 6

Cursed is the one who depends on "flesh" and blessed is the one who depends on the Lord. This simple but fundamental principle undelines all that happens to God's people in the book of Jeremiah. God is teaching His people some critical lessons, although some very difficult ones! The Lord says to Jeremiah:
"This is what the Lord says:

"Cursed is the one who trusts in man,
who draws strength from mere flesh
and whose heart turns away from the Lord.
6 That person will be like a bush in the wastelands;
they will not see prosperity when it comes.
They will dwell in the parched places of the desert,
in a salt land where no one lives.
7 "But blessed is the one who trusts in the Lord,
whose confidence is in him.
8 They will be like a tree planted by the water
that sends out its roots by the stream.
It does not fear when heat comes;
its leaves are always green.
It has no worries in a year of drought
and never fails to bear fruit."
9 The heart is deceitful above all things
and beyond cure.
Who can understand it?
10 "I the Lord search the heart
and examine the mind,
to reward each person according to their conduct,
according to what their deeds deserve." (Jeremiah 17:5-10).
Notice verse 9- the heart is "deceitful above all things". This puts to the lie the whole notion that mankind, left to itself, is fundamentally good and the intentions of the heart are pure. In this fallen world, almost the exact opposite is true. Left to ourselves, we are self-rightous, self deceptive and self seeking and serving. Only thorugh the grace of God can the heart- the most 'real" part of us- be redeemed and purified.

Jeremiah them again pleads with God to spare him, hopeful that his role in revealing God's will has earned him at least some fvor with God:

"Heal me, Lord, and I will be healed;
save me and I will be saved,
for you are the one I praise.
15 They keep saying to me,
"Where is the word of the Lord?
Let it now be fulfilled!"
16 I have not run away from being your shepherd;
you know I have not desired the day of despair.
What passes my lips is open before you.
17 Do not be a terror to me;
you are my refuge in the day of disaster.
18 Let my persecutors be put to shame,
but keep me from shame;
let them be terrified,
but keep me from terror.
Bring on them the day of disaster;
destroy them with double destruction." (Jer. 17:14-18)

God then reminds Jeremiah and the people about the strict keeping of the Sabbath. It is almost as if this is a test to see if the devotion of the people could somehow be rekindled, and that they would worship God in a way that was pleasing to Him. He certainly cares about the heart- and the attitude of the heart as we have seen previously in this prophetic book. This "test" is centered on outward behavior: *"This is what the Lord says: Be careful not to carry a load on the Sabbath day or bring it through the gates of Jerusalem. 22 Do not bring a load out of your houses or do any work on the Sabbath, but keep the Sabbath day holy, as I commanded your ancestors. 23 Yet they did not listen or pay attention; they were stiff-necked and would not listen or respond to discipline. 24 But if you are careful to obey me, declares the Lord, and bring no load through the gates of this city on the Sabbath, but keep the Sabbath day holy by not doing any work on it, 25 then kings who sit on David's throne will come through the gates of this city with their officials. They and their officials will come riding in chariots and on horses, accompanied by the men of Judah and those living in Jerusalem, and this city will be inhabited forever. 26 People will come from the towns of Judah and the villages around Jerusalem, from the territory of Benjamin and the western foothills, from the hill country and the Negev, bringing burnt offerings and sacrifices, grain offerings and incense, and bringing thank offerings to the house of the Lord. 27 But if you do not obey me to keep the Sabbath day holy by not carrying any load as you come through the gates of Jerusalem on the Sabbath day, then I will kindle an unquenchable fire in the gates of Jerusalem that will consume her fortresses.'"* (Jer. 17:21-27) The commentary is helpful here, for this "prose" section begins what is undoubtedly the recording of a series of messages from God (through Jeremiah) to the people. Please see: http://biblehub.com/commentaries/jeremiah/17-19.htm.

God, ever the perfect communicator, then uses an analogy- a sort of "visual parable" of the potter shaping clay to illustrate His point of view towards the people. He asks "If the pot is spoiled or marred, do I not have the right (as the potter does) to discard or remake that which has been ruined or is imperfect (my paraphrase)?"

God tells Jeremiah: *“This is the word that came to Jeremiah from the Lord: 2 “Go down to the potter’s house, and there I will give you my message.” 3 So I went down to the potter’s house, and I saw him working at the wheel. 4 But the pot he was shaping from the clay was marred in his hands; so the potter formed it into another pot, shaping it as seemed best to him. 5 Then the word of the Lord came to me. 6 He said, “Can I not do with you, Israel, as this potter does?” declares the Lord. “Like clay in the hand of the potter, so are you in my hand, Israel. 7 If at any time I announce that a nation or kingdom is to be uprooted, torn down and destroyed, 8 and if that nation I warned repents of its evil, then I will relent and not inflict on it the disaster I had planned. 9 And if at another time I announce that a nation or kingdom is to be built up and planted, 10 and if it does evil in my sight and does not obey me, then I will reconsider the good I had intended to do for it. 11 “Now therefore say to the people of Judah and those living in Jerusalem, ‘This is what the Lord says: Look! I am preparing a disaster for you and devising a plan against you. So turn from your evil ways, each one of you, and reform your ways and your actions.’ 12 But they will reply, ‘It’s no use. We will continue with our own plans; we will all follow the stubbornness of our evil hearts.’”*(Jer. 18:1-12).

Jeremiah then cries out to the Lord that some whom he has prophesied have “dug a pit” for him. It is not clear whether this is a figurative or literal pit, but the evil intent is very clear: They said, *“Come, let’s make plans against Jeremiah; for the teaching of the law by the priest will not cease, nor will counsel from the wise, nor the word from the prophets. So come, let’s attack him with our tongues and pay no attention to anything he says.”*

19 Listen to me, Lord;
hear what my accusers are saying!
20 Should good be repaid with evil?
Yet they have dug a pit for me.
Remember that I stood before you
and spoke in their behalf
to turn your wrath away from them.
21 So give their children over to famine;
hand them over to the power of the sword.
Let their wives be made childless and widows;
let their men be put to death,
their young men slain by the sword in battle.
22 Let a cry be heard from their houses
when you suddenly bring invaders against them,
for they have dug a pit to capture me
and have hidden snares for my feet.
23 But you, Lord, know
all their plots to kill me.
Do not forgive their crimes
or blot out their sins from your sight.
Let them be overthrown before you;
deal with them in the time of your anger.” (Jer. 18:18-23)

God again illustrates in a dramatic and visual way His anger and disgust at the people. This time he orders Jeremiah to buy a pot, and to smash it in the presence

of the “elders” of the people as an illustration for them: *“This is what the Lord says: “Go and buy a clay jar from a potter. Take along some of the elders of the people and of the priests 2 and go out to the Valley of Ben Hinnom, near the entrance of the Potsherd Gate. There proclaim the words I tell you, 3 and say, ‘Hear the word of the Lord, you kings of Judah and people of Jerusalem. This is what the Lord Almighty, the God of Israel, says: Listen! I am going to bring a disaster on this place that will make the ears of everyone who hears of it tingle. 4 For they have forsaken me and made this a place of foreign gods; they have burned incense in it to gods that neither they nor their ancestors nor the kings of Judah ever knew, and they have filled this place with the blood of the innocent. 5 They have built the high places of Baal to burn their children in the fire as offerings to Baal—something I did not command or mention, nor did it enter my mind. 6 So beware, the days are coming, declares the Lord, when people will no longer call this place Topheth or the Valley of Ben Hinnom, but the Valley of Slaughter. 7 “‘In this place I will ruin the plans of Judah and Jerusalem. I will make them fall by the sword before their enemies, at the hands of those who want to kill them, and I will give their carcasses as food to the birds and the wild animals. 8 I will devastate this city and make it an object of horror and scorn; all who pass by will be appalled and will scoff because of all its wounds. 9 I will make them eat the flesh of their sons and daughters, and they will eat one another’s flesh because their enemies will press the siege so hard against them to destroy them.’ 10 “Then break the jar while those who go with you are watching, 11 and say to them, ‘This is what the Lord Almighty says: I will smash this nation and this city just as this potter’s jar is smashed and cannot be repaired. They will bury the dead in Topheth until there is no more room. 12 This is what I will do to this place and to those who live here, declares the Lord. I will make this city like Topheth. 13 The houses in Jerusalem and those of the kings of Judah will be defiled like this place, Topheth—all the houses where they burned incense on the roofs to all the starry hosts and poured out drink offerings to other gods.’”* (Jer. 19:1-13)

Jeremiah then goes to the Temple, and proclaims to all who will hear (and perhaps some who would not) that the Lord will do- and is doing- exactly as Jeremiah had said to the elders. These grievous sins- idolatry, child sacrifice, stubborn self righteousness and self ceteredness, would be met with grave consequences: *“Jeremiah then returned from Topheth, where the Lord had sent him to prophesy, and stood in the court of the Lord’s temple and said to all the people, 15 “This is what the Lord Almighty, the God of Israel, says: ‘Listen! I am going to bring on this city and all the villages around it every disaster I pronounced against them, because they were stiff-necked and would not listen to my words.’”* (Jer. 19:14-15)

1 Timothy 6

The issue of slavery comes up again as Paul rather “matter of factly” refers to this institution. This by no means implies Scriptural approval of this institution, it is simply a culture based reference to what existed at the time of Paul’s writing. We can easily find Scriptural mandates throughout the Bible that command us to “love one another”, using the word in Greek “agape”- which (liberally translated) can be rendered “will the good for another”. It is difficult for a modern reader to see how Paul (and so many others) could casually overlook the inherent degradation of the

human spirit that this practice inevitably produces, yet it is clear from this passage and others like it that the very existence of slavery itself did not generate a societal reform. One way of looking at this is that the acceptance of slavery is still another indication of the sinful nature of Paul and the rest of his peers. Some refernces that may be helpful here: http://www.openbible.info/topics/slavery, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Bible_and_slavery; http://www.godandscience.org/apologetics/slavery_bible.html.

Paul says to Timothy: *"All who are under the yoke of slavery should consider their masters worthy of full respect, so that God's name and our teaching may not be slandered. 2 Those who have believing masters should not show them disrespect just because they are fellow believers. Instead, they should serve them even better because their masters are dear to them as fellow believers and are devoted to the welfare of their slaves."* (1 Tim 6:1-2) This passage alone is evidence enough that those who are slaves should be treated as "fellow believers".

Timothy is then reminded of the dangers inherent in those who preach and teach for material gain or for power (or both). In New Testament times, as well as in the present time, such teaching and preaching had led to confusion, misunderstanding, disillusionment and disohonor to the Word of God and the church. Satan gets the victory when such persons practice their deceptive and self-serving ways: *"These are the things you are to teach and insist on. 3 If anyone teaches otherwise and does not agree to the sound instruction of our Lord Jesus Christ and to godly teaching, 4 they are conceited and understand nothing. They have an unhealthy interest in controversies and quarrels about words that result in envy, strife, malicious talk, evil suspicions 5 and constant friction between people of corrupt mind, who have been robbed of the truth and who think that godliness is a means to financial gain. 6 But godliness with contentment is great gain. 7 For we brought nothing into the world, and we can take nothing out of it. 8 But if we have food and clothing, we will be content with that. 9 Those who want to get rich fall into temptation and a trap and into many foolish and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction. 10 For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil. Some people, eager for money, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs."* (1 Tim. 6:3-10)

Paul then commends Timothy to "fight the good fight" and to continue in his service and passionate love of the Lord: *"But you, man of God, flee from all this, and pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance and gentleness. 12 Fight the good fight of the faith. Take hold of the eternal life to which you were called when you made your good confession in the presence of many witnesses. 13 In the sight of God, who gives life to everything, and of Christ Jesus, who while testifying before Pontius Pilate made the good confession, I charge you 14 to keep this command without spot or blame until the appearing of our Lord Jesus Christ, 15 which God will bring about in his own time—God, the blessed and only Ruler, the King of kings and Lord of lords, 16 who alone is immortal and who lives in unapproachable light, whom no one has seen or can see. To him be honor and might forever. Amen.*

17 Command those who are rich in this present world not to be arrogant nor to put their hope in wealth, which is so uncertain, but to put their hope in God, who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment. 18 Command them to do good, to be

rich in good deeds, and to be generous and willing to share. 19 In this way they will lay up treasure for themselves as a firm foundation for the coming age, so that they may take hold of the life that is truly life. 20 Timothy, guard what has been entrusted to your care. Turn away from godless chatter and the opposing ideas of what is falsely called knowledge, 21 which some have professed and in so doing have departed from the faith.

Grace be with you all." (1 Tim. 6:11-21)

http://newquistvisuals.files.wordpress.com/2012/06/1timothy6-6-10.jpg

Jeremiah 20-22 October 27, 2014 2 Timothy 1

Sometimes the opposition to one who brings "bad news" is to try to punish or silence the "messenger".This was the case with Jeremiah, as Pashur, the "official in charge of the Temple" heard Jeremiah's dire prophecies and had him beaten and put into stocks. This action against God's messenger was dealth with quickly and severly- one should be careful when dealing with God's anointed- as David was with Saul: *"When the priest Pashhur son of Immer, the official in charge of the temple of the Lord, heard Jeremiah prophesying these things, 2 he had Jeremiah the prophet beaten and put in the stocks at the Upper Gate of Benjamin at the Lord's temple. 3 The next day, when Pashhur released him from the stocks, Jeremiah said to him, "The Lord's name for you is not Pashhur, but Terror on Every Side. 4 For this is what the Lord says: 'I will make you a terror to yourself and to all your friends; with your own eyes you will see them fall by the sword of their enemies. I will give all Judah into the hands of the king of Babylon, who will carry them away to Babylon or put them to the sword. 5 I will deliver all the wealth of this city into the hands of their enemies—all its products, all its valuables and all the treasures of the kings of*

Judah. They will take it away as plunder and carry it off to Babylon. 6 And you, Pashhur, and all who live in your house will go into exile to Babylon. There you will die and be buried, you and all your friends to whom you have prophesied lies.'" (Jer. 20:1-6)

Jeremiah bitterly complains to the Lord about the terrible treatment he has received for being faithful to God's calling to serve as a spokesman, a prophet who declares "This is what the Lord says…". His complaint is heard by God, but the Creator still had further tasks for him to perform *and was not swayed by Jeremiah's complaints and accusations:*

"You deceived[a] me, Lord, and I was deceived[b];
you overpowered me and prevailed.
I am ridiculed all day long;
everyone mocks me.
8 Whenever I speak, I cry out
proclaiming violence and destruction.
So the word of the Lord has brought me
insult and reproach all day long.
9 But if I say, "I will not mention his word
or speak anymore in his name,"
his word is in my heart like a fire,
a fire shut up in my bones.
I am weary of holding it in;
indeed, I cannot.
10 I hear many whispering,
"Terror on every side!
Denounce him! Let's denounce him!"
All my friends
are waiting for me to slip, saying,
"Perhaps he will be deceived;
then we will prevail over him
and take our revenge on him." (Jer. 20:7-10)

Even though Jeremiah is convinced that God is truly with him, he still bemoans the day that he was born (verse 14). This language is reminiscent of Job's complaint (Job 3:1):

11 But the Lord is with me like a mighty warrior;
so my persecutors will stumble and not prevail.
They will fail and be thoroughly disgraced;
their dishonor will never be forgotten.
12 Lord Almighty, you who examine the righteous
and probe the heart and mind,
let me see your vengeance on them,
for to you I have committed my cause.
13 Sing to the Lord!
Give praise to the Lord!
He rescues the life of the needy
from the hands of the wicked.

14 Cursed be the day I was born!
May the day my mother bore me not be blessed!
15 Cursed be the man who brought my father the news,
who made him very glad, saying,
“A child is born to you—a son!”
16 May that man be like the towns
the Lord overthrew without pity.
May he hear wailing in the morning,
a battle cry at noon.
17 For he did not kill me in the womb,
with my mother as my grave,
her womb enlarged forever.
18 Why did I ever come out of the womb
to see trouble and sorrow
and to end my days in shame?” (Jer. 20:11-18)

Zedekiah, the king of Judah, realizes the terrible plight he and his people are in. In a last minute act of desperation, he asks Jeremiah to “inquire of the Lord” and see if God will spare them. He may have remembered the miracle that God performed for Hezekiah in destroying ting Assyrina army (2 Kings 19:35-36). Surely God could save them again! God’s word is very clear at this point- “surrender or die”!: *“The word came to Jeremiah from the Lord when King Zedekiah sent to him Pashhur son of Malkijah and the priest Zephaniah son of Maaseiah. They said: 2 “Inquire now of the Lord for us because Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon is attacking us. Perhaps the Lord will perform wonders for us as in times past so that he will withdraw from us.” 3 But Jeremiah answered them, “Tell Zedekiah, 4 ‘This is what the Lord, the God of Israel, says: I am about to turn against you the weapons of war that are in your hands, which you are using to fight the king of Babylon and the Babylonians[d] who are outside the wall besieging you. And I will gather them inside this city. 5 I myself will fight against you with an outstretched hand and a mighty arm in furious anger and in great wrath. 6 I will strike down those who live in this city—both man and beast—and they will die of a terrible plague. 7 After that, declares the Lord, I will give Zedekiah king of Judah, his officials and the people in this city who survive the plague, sword and famine, into the hands of Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon and to their enemies who want to kill them. He will put them to the sword; he will show them no mercy or pity or compassion.’ 8 “Furthermore, tell the people, ‘This is what the Lord says: See, I am setting before you the way of life and the way of death. 9 Whoever stays in this city will die by the sword, famine or plague. But whoever goes out and surrenders to the Babylonians who are besieging you will live; they will escape with their lives. 10 I have determined to do this city harm and not good, declares the Lord. It will be given into the hands of the king of Babylon, and he will destroy it with fire.’* (Jer. 21:1-10)

God holds the leadership accountable for the sad state that Judah has fallen in- His anger is particularly intense against them- they were, after all, entrusted with the leadership and spiritual guidance of God’s people:

“Moreover, say to the royal house of Judah, ‘Hear the word of the Lord. 12 This is what the Lord says to you, house of David:
“‘Administer justice every morning;

rescue from the hand of the oppressor
the one who has been robbed,
or my wrath will break out and burn like fire
because of the evil you have done—
burn with no one to quench it.
13 I am against you, Jerusalem,
you who live above this valley
on the rocky plateau, declares the Lord—
you who say, "Who can come against us?
Who can enter our refuge?"
14 I will punish you as your deeds deserve,
declares the Lord.
I will kindle a fire in your forests
that will consume everything around you.'" (Jer. 21:11-14)

Those who sit on the very throne of David had a particular charge to be faithful to God, and keep the covenant he made with David (2 Sam. 7:12-16). God's anger aginst their sinful and disobedient behavior is intense and personal- he calls the kings by name and pronounces severe judgment against them: This is what the Lord says: *"Go down to the palace of the king of Judah and proclaim this message there: 2 'Hear the word of the Lord to you, king of Judah, you who sit on David's throne— you, your officials and your people who come through these gates. 3 This is what the Lord says: Do what is just and right. Rescue from the hand of the oppressor the one who has been robbed. Do no wrong or violence to the foreigner, the fatherless or the widow, and do not shed innocent blood in this place. 4 For if you are careful to carry out these commands, then kings who sit on David's throne will come through the gates of this palace, riding in chariots and on horses, accompanied by their officials and their people. 5 But if you do not obey these commands, declares the Lord, I swear by myself that this palace will become a ruin.'"*
6 For this is what the Lord says about the palace of the king of Judah:
"Though you are like Gilead to me,
like the summit of Lebanon,
I will surely make you like a wasteland,
like towns not inhabited.
7 I will send destroyers against you,
each man with his weapons,
and they will cut up your fine cedar beams
and throw them into the fire." (Jer. 22:1-7)

God speaks judgment against Shallum: "For this is what the LORD says about Shallum[e] son of Josiah, who succeeded his father as king of Judah but has gone from this place: "He will never return. 12 He will die in the place where they have led him captive; he will not see this land again."" (Jer. 22:11-12)

About Jehoiakim this is said: *"Therefore this is what the Lord says about Jehoiakim son of Josiah king of Judah:*

"They will not mourn for him:
'Alas, my brother! Alas, my sister!'

They will not mourn for him:
‘Alas, my master! Alas, his splendor!’
19 He will have the burial of a donkey—
dragged away and thrown
outside the gates of Jerusalem.” (Jer. 22:18-19)

And against Jehoiachin: *“As surely as I live,” declares the Lord, “even if you, Jehoiachin son of Jehoiakim king of Judah, were a signet ring on my right hand, I would still pull you off. 25 I will deliver you into the hands of those who want to kill you, those you fear—Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon and the Babylonians. 26 I will hurl you and the mother who gave you birth into another country, where neither of you was born, and there you both will die. 27 You will never come back to the land you long to return to.”*

28 Is this man Jehoiachin a despised, broken pot,
an object no one wants?
Why will he and his children be hurled out,
cast into a land they do not know?
29 O land, land, land,
hear the word of the Lord!
30 This is what the Lord says:
“Record this man as if childless,
a man who will not prosper in his lifetime,
for none of his offspring will prosper,
none will sit on the throne of David
or rule anymore in Judah.” (Jer 22:24-30)

God is a vey personal God- he knows us by name. In many cases this is a great comfort, however for these who led Judah in this dark time, it was a terrifying reality!

2 Timothy 1

Timothy was a much beloved “spiritual son” of Paul’s. Despite the fact that Timothy was not of pure Jewish lineage (his father was a Greek- Acts 16:1), he was entrusted as the spiritual leader of the church in Ephesus. Paul had already written a letter to Timoth- a “pastoral letter” giving him valuable advice and counsel about the successful running of the church, and care of the spiritual and logistical needs of the body of believers (1 Timothy). This second letter, although disputed by some scholars as to Pauline authorship (Collins, Raymond F. *1 & 2 Timothy and Titus: A Commentary*. Westminster John Knox Press. 2004. p. 4 please see also http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Second_Epistle_to_Timothy), follows the same pattern as the first letter.

Paul first greets Timothy and gives thanks to God for his faith, which was nurtured in him by both his mother and grandmother: *“Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, in keeping with the promise of life that is in Christ Jesus,*

2 To Timothy, my dear son:

Grace, mercy and peace from God the Father and Christ Jesus our Lord.
3 I thank God, whom I serve, as my ancestors did, with a clear conscience, as night and day I constantly remember you in my prayers. 4 Recalling your tears, I long to see you, so that I may be filled with joy. 5 I am reminded of your sincere faith, which first lived in your grandmother Lois and in your mother Eunice and, I am persuaded, now lives in you also." (2 Tim. 1:1-5)

Paul reminds Timothy of the suffering he has endured for the gospel, and asks him to continue his loyalty both to Paul and the work that he is doing for the Lord: "*For the Spirit God gave us does not make us timid, but gives us power, love and self-discipline. 8 So do not be ashamed of the testimony about our Lord or of me his prisoner. Rather, join with me in suffering for the gospel, by the power of God. 9 He has saved us and called us to a holy life—not because of anything we have done but because of his own purpose and grace. This grace was given us in Christ Jesus before the beginning of time, 10 but it has now been revealed through the appearing of our Savior, Christ Jesus, who has destroyed death and has brought life and immortality to light through the gospel. 11 And of this gospel I was appointed a herald and an apostle and a teacher. 12 That is why I am suffering as I am. Yet this is no cause for shame, because I know whom I have believed, and am convinced that he is able to guard what I have entrusted to him until that day. 13 What you heard from me, keep as the pattern of sound teaching, with faith and love in Christ Jesus. 14 Guard the good deposit that was entrusted to you—guard it with the help of the Holy Spirit who lives in us."* (2 Tim. 1:7-14)

In the ministry of the gospel, there are always those who are indifferent to the message, and some are hostile and obstruct and try to limit the spread of or effectiveness of this evangelistic and discipling effort by Paul and others. Paul reminds Timothy that he, too, has had serious opposition in the form of several persons whom he names: *"You know that everyone in the province of Asia has deserted me, including Phygelus and Hermogenes. 16 May the Lord show mercy to the household of Onesiphorus, because he often refreshed me and was not ashamed of my chains. 17 On the contrary, when he was in Rome, he searched hard for me until he found me. 18 May the Lord grant that he will find mercy from the Lord on that day! You know very well in how many ways he helped me in Ephesus."* (2 Tim. 1:15-18). Paul also gives sincere thanks for the ones who have helped!

Jeremiah 23-24 October 28, 2014 2 Timothy 2

Near term fulfilment…long term (distant) fulfilment? This Scripture has elements of both in the description of the Shepherd that will come from the line of David that will gather the flock and minister to this "faithful remnant". It is likely that there was a person (or persons) who have filled this role. It is hard to miss- especially for a Christian reader of these verses- the obvious prophetic reference to Jesus:
"The days are coming," declares the Lord,
"when I will raise up for David a righteous Branch,
a King who will reign wisely
and do what is just and right in the land.

6 In his days Judah will be saved
and Israel will live in safety.
This is the name by which he will be called:
The Lord Our Righteous Savior." (Jer. 23:5-6)

The Scripture is "living" (Heb. 4:12) and so are the readers of the Word itself. We see different shades of meaning in God's Word in part because we bring our own changing life experiences to the Word, as well as our own theology and doctrinal training. A Christian would "naturally" see this passage as Messianic, whereas a Jew or a member of another religious group may not.

God is promising here that "after the storm"- the storm that was generated from Israel's disobedience and idolatry- there will again be restoration. The remnant that was faithful will be cared for with the full measure of the Creator's love.

The lies and false prophesy that have issued from some self decalred "prophets" will be ended and punishment issued to those who dared to say "This is what the Lord says":

"Concerning the prophets:

My heart is broken within me;
all my bones tremble.
I am like a drunken man,
like a strong man overcome by wine,
because of the Lord
and his holy words.
10 The land is full of adulterers;
because of the curse the land lies parched
and the pastures in the wilderness are withered.
The prophets follow an evil course
and use their power unjustly.
11 "Both prophet and priest are godless;
even in my temple I find their wickedness,"
declares the Lord.
12 "Therefore their path will become slippery;
they will be banished to darkness
and there they will fall.
I will bring disaster on them
in the year they are punished,"
declares the Lord." (Jer. 23:9-12)

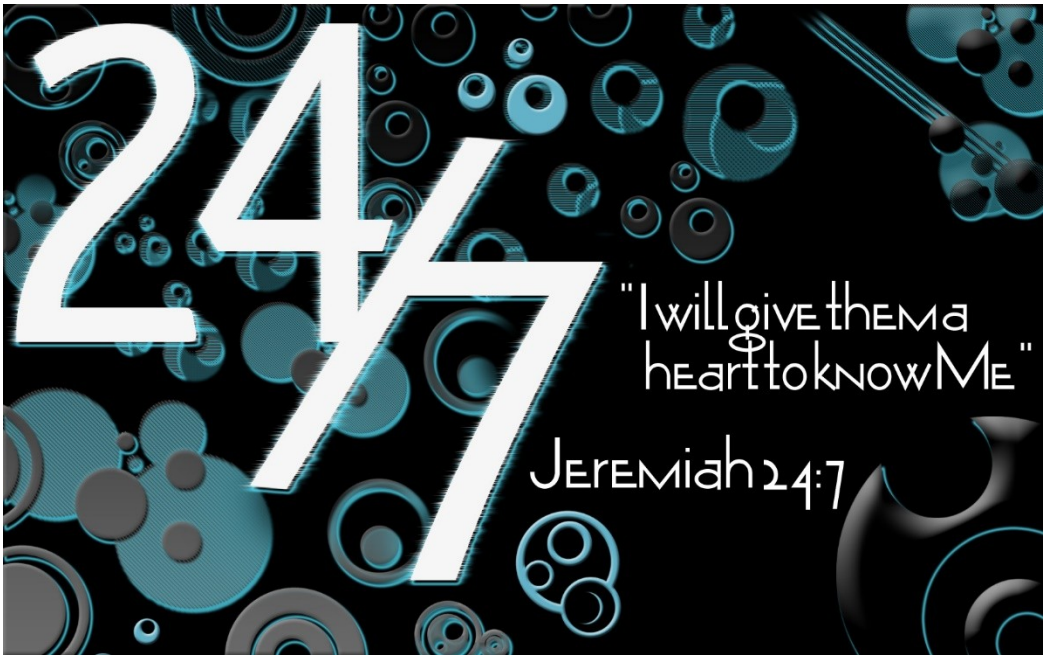
God explains to Jeremiah and the people that he did not commission or send these liars:

"The anger of the Lord will not turn back

until he fully accomplishes
the purposes of his heart.
In days to come
you will understand it clearly.
21 I did not send these prophets,
yet they have run with their message;
I did not speak to them,
yet they have prophesied.
22 But if they had stood in my council,
they would have proclaimed my words to my people
and would have turned them from their evil ways
and from their evil deeds." (Jer. 23:20-22)

God then teaches Jeremiah a graphic lesson, using as His illustration two baskets of figs. The perfect communication that God uses is similar to that used by His Son- everyday objects, situtations and experiences are used to vividly and memorable illustrate great spiritual principles and lessons. The people certainly knew about figs, and could easily tell a "good" from a "bad" one. So God, always interested in clear and memorable communication, uses a basket of figs to illustrate to Jeremiah the difference in those He reagrds as faithful and unfaithful:

"After Jehoiachin son of Jehoiakim king of Judah and the officials, the skilled workers and the artisans of Judah were carried into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon by Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon, the Lord showed me two baskets of figs placed in front of the temple of the Lord. 2 One basket had very good figs, like those that ripen early; the other basket had very bad figs, so bad they could not be eaten.
3 Then the Lord asked me, "What do you see, Jeremiah?"
"Figs," I answered. "The good ones are very good, but the bad ones are so bad they cannot be eaten."
4 Then the word of the Lord came to me: 5 "This is what the Lord, the God of Israel, says: 'Like these good figs, I regard as good the exiles from Judah, whom I sent away from this place to the land of the Babylonians. 6 My eyes will watch over them for their good, and I will bring them back to this land. I will build them up and not tear them down; I will plant them and not uproot them. 7 I will give them a heart to know me, that I am the Lord. They will be my people, and I will be their God, for they will return to me with all their heart.
"'But like the bad figs, which are so bad they cannot be eaten,' says the Lord, 'so will I deal with Zedekiah king of Judah, his officials and the survivors from Jerusalem, whether they remain in this land or live in Egypt. 9 I will make them abhorrent and an offense to all the kingdoms of the earth, a reproach and a byword, a curse and an object of ridicule, wherever I banish them. 10 I will send the sword, famine and plague against them until they are destroyed from the land I gave to them and their ancestors.'" (Jer 24:1-10)



http://dwellingintheword.wordpress.com/2013/07/04/1089-jeremiah-24/

2 Timothy 2

In mentoring Timothy, Paul was careful to take every opportunity to advise him about the "ways" that Timothy could serve the chuch effectively, teach and preach with authority and power, and to grow stronger spiritually. This mentoring, or "discipling" as we more often call it, is the very heart and soul of the building of the Kingdom. When we spend quality and unhurried tiome with another and systematically train, exhort, pray for and teach another, several wonderful things happen. First, the kingdom gains another member- a growing and maturing member who will be a "worthy image bearer" of God! Another wonderful benefit is that this disciple can- and in God's grace will- disciple another. Paul explains to Timothy that the Christain walk, although one in which suffering is real, is a worthy life calling: *"You then, my son, be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus. 2 And the things you have heard me say in the presence of many witnesses entrust to reliable people who will also be qualified to teach others. 3 Join with me in suffering, like a good soldier of Christ Jesus. 4 No one serving as a soldier gets entangled in civilian affairs, but rather tries to please his commanding officer. 5 Similarly, anyone who competes as an athlete does not receive the victor's crown except by competing according to the rules. 6 The hardworking farmer should be the first to receive a share of the crops. 7 Reflect on what I am saying, for the Lord will give you insight into all this."* (2 Tim. 2:1-7)

The suffering and heroic efforts of the disciple are not for their own sake. The suffering allows us to participate in the suffering of the One who saved us, and allows us to be molded into useful instruments of God's love and grace. Ultimately, we will then become more like Him and achieve the great prize of salvation for ourselves and for others as well: *"Remember Jesus Christ, raised from the dead,*

descended from David. This is my gospel, 9 for which I am suffering even to the point of being chained like a criminal. But God's word is not chained. 10 Therefore I endure everything for the sake of the elect, that they too may obtain the salvation that is in Christ Jesus, with eternal glory." (2 Tim. 2:8-10)

Then we encounter another "trustworthy saying", here in the form of a poem that will be more easily memorized:
"Here is a trustworthy saying:

If we died with him,
we will also live with him;
12 if we endure,
we will also reign with him.
If we disown him,
he will also disown us;
13 if we are faithless,
he remains faithful,
for he cannot disown himself." (2 Tim. 2:11-13)

Timothy, and his church, must be especially careful to stay away from "false teachers". We will ultimately know tham "by their fruit" – dissention, greed, backbiting, envy and strife within the church- but these are clever and subtle teachers who carefully disguide their true motives and interntions: *"Keep reminding God's people of these things. Warn them before God against quarreling about words; it is of no value, and only ruins those who listen. 15 Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth. 16 Avoid godless chatter, because those who indulge in it will become more and more ungodly. 17 Their teaching will spread like gangrene. Among them are Hymenaeus and Philetus, 18 who have departed from the truth. They say that the resurrection has already taken place, and they destroy the faith of some. 19 Nevertheless, God's solid foundation stands firm, sealed with this inscription: "The Lord knows those who are his," and, "Everyone who confesses the name of the Lord must turn away from wickedness."* (2 Tim. 2:14-19)

We are, however to pray for these "false teachers" just as we are for all sinners who distort the very Word of God to suit their own objectives and plans. God's grace and mercy can change their hearts and redeem their very souls- changing an enemy to an ally: *"Flee the evil desires of youth and pursue righteousness, faith, love and peace, along with those who call on the Lord out of a pure heart. 23 Don't have anything to do with foolish and stupid arguments, because you know they produce quarrels. 24 And the Lord's servant must not be quarrelsome but must be kind to everyone, able to teach, not resentful. 25 Opponents must be gently instructed, in the hope that God will grant them repentance leading them to a knowledge of the truth, 26 and that they will come to their senses and escape from the trap of the devil, who has taken them captive to do his will."* (2 Timothy 2:22-26)

I buy you books and buy you books and all you do is chew the covers! This expression of exasperation at a child is apt for the frustration and anger God feels about His people-Jeremiah reminds them that they have not been warned a few times over a few years, but constantly over twenty three years, and the people ignored the warnings and went on doing and being exactly as they had before: *"The word came to Jeremiah concerning all the people of Judah in the fourth year of Jehoiakim son of Josiah king of Judah, which was the first year of Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon. 2 So Jeremiah the prophet said to all the people of Judah and to all those living in Jerusalem: 3 For twenty-three years—from the thirteenth year of Josiah son of Amon king of Judah until this very day—the word of the Lord has come to me and I have spoken to you again and again, but you have not listened. 4 And though the Lord has sent all his servants the prophets to you again and again, you have not listened or paid any attention. 5 They said, "Turn now, each of you, from your evil ways and your evil practices, and you can stay in the land the Lord gave to you and your ancestors for ever and ever. 6 Do not follow other gods to serve and worship them; do not arouse my anger with what your hands have made. Then I will not harm you." 7 "But you did not listen to me," declares the Lord, "and you have aroused my anger with what your hands have made, and you have brought harm to yourselves."* (Jer 25:1-7) Now the time had finally come for them to realize the consequences of ignoring God!

The punishment was to be seventy years of exile and captivity by God's "servant" Nebuchadnezzar (verse 9). Seventy years was longer than the people wandered in the wilderness because of unbelief about their ability to take Canann- the Promised Land. It makes you wonder if in God's eyes the people had sunk even further- and needed more time to reflect and re-dicover their calling. Seventy years would pass before God graciously promised redemption and forgiveness- and a return to the homeland: *"But when the seventy years are fulfilled, I will punish the king of Babylon and his nation, the land of the Babylonians, for their guilt," declares the Lord, "and will make it desolate forever. 13 I will bring on that land all the things I have spoken against it, all that are written in this book and prophesied by Jeremiah against all the nations. 14 They themselves will be enslaved by many nations and great kings; I will repay them according to their deeds and the work of their hands."* (Jer. 25:12-14).

The Lord's anger will be a terrible anfd terrifying thing to behold:
At that time those slain by the Lord will be everywhere—from one end of the earth to the other. They will not be mourned or gathered up or buried, but will be like dung lying on the ground.

"Weep and wail, you shepherds;
roll in the dust, you leaders of the flock.
For your time to be slaughtered has come;
you will fall like the best of the rams.
35 The shepherds will have nowhere to flee,
the leaders of the flock no place to escape.
36 Hear the cry of the shepherds,
the wailing of the leaders of the flock,

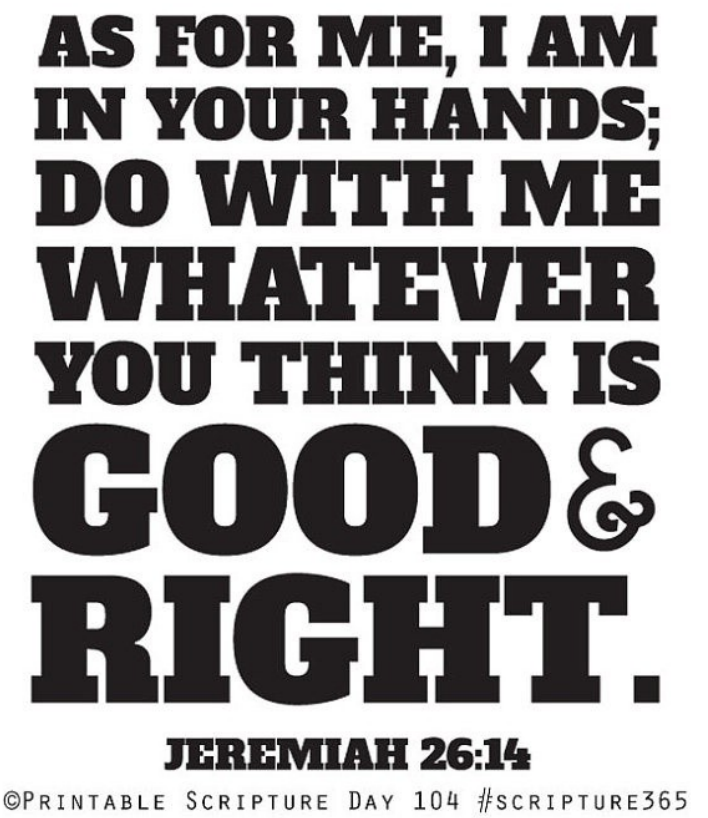
for the Lord is destroying their pasture.
37 The peaceful meadows will be laid waste
because of the fierce anger of the Lord.
38 Like a lion he will leave his lair,
and their land will become desolate
because of the sword of the oppressor
and because of the Lord's fierce anger." (Jer. 25:33-38)

Jeremiah's life was then threatened. This was one of the constant threats to a "true prophet" who spoke only as God directed, and not to please men. IT is understandable that nobody really wants to hear bad news, but many times bad news is exactly what is needed to catch the attention of the offendor and motivate them to return to the path that leads to life. The people plotted against Jeremiah, and only Jeremiah's friendship with a high official spared his life. The prophet courageously proclaimed God's word- and did not "omit a word" (verse 2): *"Early in the reign of Jehoiakim son of Josiah king of Judah, this word came from the Lord: 2 "This is what the Lord says: Stand in the courtyard of the Lord's house and speak to all the people of the towns of Judah who come to worship in the house of the Lord. Tell them everything I command you; do not omit a word. 3 Perhaps they will listen and each will turn from their evil ways. Then I will relent and not inflict on them the disaster I was planning because of the evil they have done. 4 Say to them, 'This is what the Lord says: If you do not listen to me and follow my law, which I have set before you, 5 and if you do not listen to the words of my servants the prophets, whom I have sent to you again and again (though you have not listened), 6 then I will make this house like Shiloh and this city a curse among all the nations of the earth.'"* (Jer. 26:1-6)

The crowd, who wanted to act as judge, jury and executioner, decided that Jeremiah must die (verse 8). They gathered aroubnd him at the "house of the Lord" eager to carry out their evil wishes: *"The priests, the prophets and all the people heard Jeremiah speak these words in the house of the Lord. 8 But as soon as Jeremiah finished telling all the people everything the Lord had commanded him to say, the priests, the prophets and all the people seized him and said, "You must die! 9 Why do you prophesy in the Lord's name that this house will be like Shiloh and this city will be desolate and deserted?" And all the people crowded around Jeremiah in the house of the Lord."* (Jer. 26:7-9)

Jeremiah wars them that if they kill him they will be shedding innocent bllod, and will be laible for the consequences that may come from God for this terrible act. Jeremiah also shows he clear submission to God, similar in tone to the New Year's Prayer of John Wesley (the Covenant Prayer please see: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wesley_Covenant_Prayer): "Then Jeremiah said to all the officials and all the people: "*The LORD sent me to prophesyagainst this house and this city all the things you have heard. 13 Now reform your ways and your actions and obey the LORD your God. Then the LORD will relent and not bring the disaster he has pronounced against you. 14 As for me, I am in your hands; do with me whatever you think is good and right. 15 Be assured, however, that if you put me to death, you will bring the guilt of innocent blood on yourselves and on this city*

and on those who live in it, for in truth the LORD has sent me to you to speak all these words in your hearing." (Jer. 26:12-15)



http://www.pinterest.com/pin/362117626259946929/

There was certainly precedent for killing of prophets whose message did not please the people. Uriah had been threatened, and then consequently fled to Egypt. The people tracked him down and put him to death, throwing his body into a common burial place- this showed total disrespect both for the prophet and his message. Jeremiah, therefore, had every reason to be concerned for his very life: *"(Now Uriah son of Shemaiah from Kiriath Jearim was another man who prophesied in the name of the Lord; he prophesied the same things against this city and this land as Jeremiah did. 21 When King Jehoiakim and all his officers and officials heard his words, the king was determined to put him to death. But Uriah heard of it and fled in fear to Egypt. 22 King Jehoiakim, however, sent Elnathan son of Akbor to Egypt, along with some other men. 23 They brought Uriah out of Egypt and took him to King Jehoiakim, who had him struck down with a sword and his body thrown into the burial place of the common people.) 24 Furthermore, Ahikam son of Shaphan supported Jeremiah, and so he was not handed over to the people to be put to death."* (Jer. 26:20-24)

2 Timothy 3

In the last days…this phrase has been used to describe a veritablke plethora of different activities, happenings and world changing events. Paul warns Timothy that dire and terrible acts will occur: *"But mark this: There will be terrible times in the*

last days. 2 People will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boastful, proud, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, 3 without love, unforgiving, slanderous, without self-control, brutal, not lovers of the good, 4 treacherous, rash, conceited, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God— 5 having a form of godliness but denying its power. Have nothing to do with such people. 6 They are the kind who worm their way into homes and gain control over gullible women, who are loaded down with sins and are swayed by all kinds of evil desires, 7 always learning but never able to come to a knowledge of the truth. 8 Just as Jannes and Jambres opposed Moses, so also these teachers oppose the truth. They are men of depraved minds, who, as far as the faith is concerned, are rejected. 9 But they will not get very far because, as in the case of those men, their folly will be clear to everyone." (2 Tim. 3:1-9) Certainly the acts described here are rampant today- greed "greed is good" (quote from the movie "Wall Street"), boatfulness, pride, ingratitude, entitlement of all kinds…the list goes on. We must also remember that neither we in this age or they in theirs knew when the "last days" were coming.

Many in the early church believed Jesus' return to be imminent. We simply don't know, despite those who have predicted these days as recently as 2011 by Harold Camping of Family Radio (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2011_end_times_prediction) and in 2012 with the confluence of the "Mayan Calendar" phenomenon and other "end of an era" prophesies (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2012_phenomenon).

Moving from what we "don't know" to what we "do know", Paul reminds Timothy of the works that he and his coworkers have accomplished and the attitudes of the hearts of Paul and those who labored with him, and that the one reliable guide for life, doctrine and conduct is the Scriptures themselves: *"You, however, know all about my teaching, my way of life, my purpose, faith, patience, love, endurance, 11 persecutions, sufferings—what kinds of things happened to me in Antioch, Iconium and Lystra, the persecutions I endured. Yet the Lord rescued me from all of them. 12 In fact, everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted, 13 while evildoers and impostors will go from bad to worse, deceiving and being deceived. 14 But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have become convinced of, because you know those from whom you learned it, 15 and how from infancy you have known the Holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. 16 All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, 17 so that the servant of God[a] may be thoroughly equipped for every good work."* (2 Tim. 3:10-17). So if we need spiritual "equipment", we need to visit, study, memorize and pray through the Scriptures. They are our reliable guide and companion.

Jeremiah 27-28 October 30, 2014 2 Timothy 4

Time for more "acting out"! Jeremiah is instructed by the Lord to illustrate the "yoke" that Israel is to bear from the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar, by placing a yoke on his neck and appearing before the people "yoked". God's command is clear- submit to Babylon, or die by plague or sword. Don't believe the "lying false prophets" who promise peace and freedom: *"Early in the reign of Zedekiah son of Josiah king of Judah, this word came to Jeremiah from the Lord: 2 This is what the Lord said to me: "Make a yoke out of straps and crossbars and put it on your neck. 3 Then send word to the kings of Edom, Moab, Ammon, Tyre and Sidon through the*

envoys who have come to Jerusalem to Zedekiah king of Judah. 4 Give them a message for their masters and say, ‘This is what the Lord Almighty, the God of Israel, says: “Tell this to your masters: 5 With my great power and outstretched arm I made the earth and its people and the animals that are on it, and I give it to anyone I please. 6 Now I will give all your countries into the hands of my servant Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon; I will make even the wild animals subject to him. 7 All nations will serve him and his son and his grandson until the time for his land comes; then many nations and great kings will subjugate him. 8 ‘“If, however, any nation or kingdom will not serve Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon or bow its neck under his yoke, I will punish that nation with the sword, famine and plague, declares the Lord, until I destroy it by his hand. 9 So do not listen to your prophets, your diviners, your interpreters of dreams, your mediums or your sorcerers who tell you, ‘You will not serve the king of Babylon.’ 10 They prophesy lies to you that will only serve to remove you far from your lands; I will banish you and you will perish. 11 But if any nation will bow its neck under the yoke of the king of Babylon and serve him, I will let that nation remain in its own land to till it and to live there, declares the Lord.’” (Jer. 27:1-11)

Weigel Engraving, Hananiah and Jeremiah

The king himself is also subject to this “yoke”, and the articles from the Temple that were taken when the Temple was ransacked- these will not be returned to Judah until the Lord has decided that the time has come for such restoration. The “lying prophets” may say otherwise, but the Lord’s Word is sure and straightforward: *“I gave the same message to Zedekiah king of Judah. I said, “Bow your neck under the yoke of the king of Babylon; serve him and his people, and you will live. 13 Why will you and your people die by the sword, famine and plague with which the Lord has*

threatened any nation that will not serve the king of Babylon? 14 Do not listen to the words of the prophets who say to you, 'You will not serve the king of Babylon,' for they are prophesying lies to you. 15 'I have not sent them,' declares the Lord. 'They are prophesying lies in my name. Therefore, I will banish you and you will perish, both you and the prophets who prophesy to you.'"

16 Then I said to the priests and all these people, "This is what the Lord says: Do not listen to the prophets who say, 'Very soon now the articles from the Lord's house will be brought back from Babylon.' They are prophesying lies to you. 17 Do not listen to them. Serve the king of Babylon, and you will live. Why should this city become a ruin? 18 If they are prophets and have the word of the Lord, let them plead with the Lord Almighty that the articles remaining in the house of the Lord and in the palace of the king of Judah and in Jerusalem not be taken to Babylon. 19 For this is what the Lord Almighty says about the pillars, the bronze Sea, the movable stands and the other articles that are left in this city, 20 which Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon did not take away when he carried Jehoiachin son of Jehoiakim king of Judah into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon, along with all the nobles of Judah and Jerusalem— 21 yes, this is what the Lord Almighty, the God of Israel, says about the things that are left in the house of the Lord and in the palace of the king of Judah and in Jerusalem: 22 'They will be taken to Babylon and there they will remain until the day I come for them,' declares the Lord. 'Then I will bring them back and restore them to this place.'" (Jer. 27:12-22)

Another false prophet, this is which is named, opposes Jeremiah and God's Word. He contradicts Jeremiah's message, claiming that they captives will return- along with the Temple items- in two years. Jeremiah is stern and authoritateive in dealing with this challenge. He reminds Hannaniah that the prophecies issued by a prophet must be true- and verifiable. The penalty for false prophesy is death*: "In the fifth month of that same year, the fourth year, early in the reign of Zedekiah king of Judah, the prophet Hananiah son of Azzur, who was from Gibeon, said to me in the house of the Lord in the presence of the priests and all the people: 2 "This is what the Lord Almighty, the God of Israel, says: 'I will break the yoke of the king of Babylon. 3 Within two years I will bring back to this place all the articles of the Lord's house that Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon removed from here and took to Babylon. 4 I will also bring back to this place Jehoiachin[c] son of Jehoiakim king of Judah and all the other exiles from Judah who went to Babylon,' declares the Lord, 'for I will break the yoke of the king of Babylon.'"* (Jer. 28:1-4).

Faced with this challenge, Jeremiah sternly challenges this false prophet, and tells Hannaniah that he will be "removed from the earth" for causing rebellion against the true Word of God: *"After the prophet Hananiah had broken the yoke off the neck of the prophet Jeremiah, the word of the Lord came to Jeremiah: 13 "Go and tell Hananiah, 'This is what the Lord says: You have broken a wooden yoke, but in its place you will get a yoke of iron. 14 This is what the Lord Almighty, the God of Israel, says: I will put an iron yoke on the necks of all these nations to make them serve Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon, and they will serve him. I will even give him control over the wild animals.'"*

15 Then the prophet Jeremiah said to Hananiah the prophet, "Listen, Hananiah! The Lord has not sent you, yet you have persuaded this nation to trust in lies. 16

Therefore this is what the Lord says: 'I am about to remove you from the face of the earth. This very year you are going to die, because you have preached rebellion against the Lord.'" 17 In the seventh month of that same year, Hananiah the prophet died." (Jer 28:12-17).

This is not the only time that rebellion has been punished with death. We may recall the incident when Aaron's priestly appointment and authority were challenged by Korah and his followers (Numbers 16:28-35). God sometimes "removes" those who are impediments to the body and who are spreading rumors, lies and dissent in the church- this has been my personal observation as well. Two particular cases come to mind from my home church. A couple who were sources of the "rumor mill" issuing falsehoods and dissention against the pastor later became to ill to attend church; a lung cancer patient in the midst of a brief remission issued scalding epithets that were hateful and racial against another member, and she was soon 'removed from the earth". I don't believe God is vindictive or arbitrary, but in some cases God allows dissenters and "troublemakers" to be removed by death or illness. The health and welfare of the body is important, as these cases illustrate!

2 Timothy 4

Ministers of the gospel, paid or unpaid, "professional" or volunteer, are tasked by God to be prepared "in season or out of season" to be ready to peoclaim God's Word to the people. Timothy is told by Paul that this is part of his calling as minister/preacher- to have a Word from the Lord ready if there are those that will hear it: *"In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who will judge the living and the dead, and in view of his appearing and his kingdom, I give you this charge: 2 Preach the word; be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke and encourage —with great patience and careful instruction. 3 For the time will come when people will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear. 4 They will turn their ears away from the truth and turn aside to myths. 5 But you, keep your head in all situations, endure hardship, do the work of an evangelist, discharge all the duties of your ministry."* (2 Tim. 4:1-5)

It is not clear- to me at least- what Paul is saying in the next part of his pastoral letter. His time was always "too short" when he was in ministry- there were- and are- never enough hours in a given day to do the ministry that God calls us to do- that is why he patiently teaches us to "depend on Him"! Paul tells Timothy that his time is short- perhaps in ministry with Timothy or perhaps even referring to his own death: *"For I am already being poured out like a drink offering, and the time for my departure is near. 7 I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. 8 Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day—and not only to me, but also to all who have longed for his appearing."* (2 Tim. 4:6-8) (Please see: http://biblehub.com/commentaries/2_timothy/4-6.htm)

Paul then refers to opposition to his ministry by "Alexander the metal worker", but importantly, avoids seeking any "revenge" on his enemy- a model for all of us to follow: *"Alexander the metalworker did me a great deal of harm. The Lord will repay*

him for what he has done. 15 You too should be on your guard against him, because he strongly opposed our message. 16 At my first defense, no one came to my support, but everyone deserted me. May it not be held against them. 17 But the Lord stood at my side and gave me strength, so that through me the message might be fully proclaimed and all the Gentiles might hear it. And I was delivered from the lion's mouth. 18 The Lord will rescue me from every evil attack and will bring me safely to his heavenly kingdom. To him be glory for ever and ever. Amen." (2 Tim. 4:14-18)

Paul then gives his final greetings to Timothy, noticeably naming several of those faith coworkers and colaborers, including Priscilla- a woman Paul loved and trusted: *"Greet Priscilla and Aquila and the household of Onesiphorus. 20 Erastus stayed in Corinth, and I left Trophimus sick in Miletus. 21 Do your best to get here before winter. Eubulus greets you, and so do Pudens, Linus, Claudia and all the brothers and sisters. 22 The Lord be with your spirit. Grace be with you all."* (2 Tim. 4:19-22).

Jeremiah 29-30 October 31, 2014 Titus 1

Even in exile, even when things seemed darkest- there was still hope! The people had been in exile, and had cried out to God for help and for mercy- even though many knew they richly deserved the punishment that had been unleashed on them. And God speaks words of encouragement to Jeremiah- for the sake of the people. His intent is that these words might offer both hope and encouragement. God tells Jeremiah:
"This is what the Lord Almighty, the God of Israel, says to all those I carried into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: 5 "Build houses and settle down; plant gardens and eat what they produce. 6 Marry and have sons and daughters; find wives for your sons and give your daughters in marriage, so that they too may have sons and daughters. Increase in number there; do not decrease. 7 Also, seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the Lord for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper." 8 Yes, this is what the Lord Almighty, the God of Israel, says: "Do not let the prophets and diviners among you deceive you. Do not listen to the dreams you encourage them to have. 9 They are prophesying lies to you in my name. I have not sent them," declares the Lord.

10 This is what the Lord says: "When seventy years are completed for Babylon, I will come to you and fulfill my good promise to bring you back to this place. 11 For I know the plans I have for you," declares the Lord, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future. 12 Then you will call on me and come and pray to me, and I will listen to you. 13 You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart. 14 I will be found by you," declares the Lord, "and will bring you back from captivity.[b] I will gather you from all the nations and places where I have banished you," declares the Lord, "and will bring you back to the place from which I carried you into exile." (Jer 29:1-14). If we were writing the script, we would "edit out" verse 10 and substitute "immediately" for "when seventy years are completed". We are always impatient for God's promises- the "good ones" that we like, to go to fruition. God knows better- it takes time for the enormity of the sins of Israel to 'sink in"- it takes time to reflect on the sins of the past and come to a true commitment to live righteously, as God expects and commands! And God has

“plans” (verse 11) not only for His people at that time in history but for us as well- despite the hardness of our hearts.

The God gives Jeremiah a “long poem” which describes the restoration of His people- they will indeed return to the Land that was promised, and joy will once more fill their hearts as they praise their gracious God:
These are the words the Lord spoke concerning Israel and Judah: *5 “This is what the Lord says:*

“‘Cries of fear are heard—
terror, not peace.
6 Ask and see:
Can a man bear children?
Then why do I see every strong man
with his hands on his stomach like a woman in labor,
every face turned deathly pale?
7 How awful that day will be!
No other will be like it.
It will be a time of trouble for Jacob,
but he will be saved out of it.
8 “‘In that day,’ declares the Lord Almighty,
‘I will break the yoke off their necks
and will tear off their bonds;
no longer will foreigners enslave them.
9 Instead, they will serve the Lord their God
and David their king,
whom I will raise up for them.
10 “‘So do not be afraid, Jacob my servant;
do not be dismayed, Israel,’
declares the Lord.
‘I will surely save you out of a distant place,
your descendants from the land of their exile.
Jacob will again have peace and security,
and no one will make him afraid.
11 I am with you and will save you,’
declares the Lord.
‘Though I completely destroy all the nations
among which I scatter you,
I will not completely destroy you.
I will discipline you but only in due measure;
I will not let you go entirely unpunished.’
12 “This is what the Lord says:

“‘Your wound is incurable,
your injury beyond healing.
13 There is no one to plead your cause,
no remedy for your sore,
no healing for you.
14 All your allies have forgotten you;
they care nothing for you.

I have struck you as an enemy would
and punished you as would the cruel,
because your guilt is so great
and your sins so many.
15 Why do you cry out over your wound,
your pain that has no cure?
Because of your great guilt and many sins
I have done these things to you.
16 “‘But all who devour you will be devoured;
all your enemies will go into exile.
Those who plunder you will be plundered;
all who make spoil of you I will despoil.
17 But I will restore you to health
and heal your wounds,’
declares the Lord,
‘because you are called an outcast,
Zion for whom no one cares.’
18 “This is what the Lord says:

“‘I will restore the fortunes of Jacob’s tents
and have compassion on his dwellings;
the city will be rebuilt on her ruins,
and the palace will stand in its proper place.
19 From them will come songs of thanksgiving
and the sound of rejoicing.
I will add to their numbers,
and they will not be decreased;
I will bring them honor,
and they will not be disdained.
20 Their children will be as in days of old,
and their community will be established before me;
I will punish all who oppress them.
21 Their leader will be one of their own;
their ruler will arise from among them.
I will bring him near and he will come close to me—
for who is he who will devote himself
to be close to me?’
declares the Lord.
22 “‘So you will be my people,
and I will be your God.’”
23 See, the storm of the Lord
will burst out in wrath,
a driving wind swirling down
on the heads of the wicked.
24 The fierce anger of the Lord will not turn back
until he fully accomplishes
the purposes of his heart.
In days to come
you will understand this.” (Jer. 30:5-24)

It is somewhat of an understatement to say that “in days to come you will understand this” (verse 30). Only after a season of grief and mourning, only after sincere repentance will the people “understand this”- the purposes and plans of God are not easily understood- His ways, he tell us, are not our ways (Isa. 55:8-9) – but His ways are perfect!

Titus 1

Titus was a mentee of Paul’s, mentioned in the letter to the Galatians (Gal. 2:1-3). He was believed in church history and tradition to be a Gentile convert who served later as the bishop of the church in Crete (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Saint_Titus). This letter is similar in wording and tone as the pastoral letter from Paul to Timothy.

Paul starts his letter in the usual manner, warmly greeting Titus: *”Paul, a servant of God and an apostle of Jesus Christ to further the faith of God’s elect and their knowledge of the truth that leads to godliness— 2 in the hope of eternal life, which God, who does not lie, promised before the beginning of time, 3 and which now at his appointed season he has brought to light through the preaching entrusted to me by the command of God our Savior, 4 To Titus, my true son in our common faith: Grace and peace from God the Father and Christ Jesus our Savior.”* (Titus 1:1-4)

In very similar fashion as he did with Timothy, Paul delineates the qualifications of an elder, whose leadership is key to the spiritual helth and success of the church: *“The reason I left you in Crete was that you might put in order what was left unfinished and appoint[a] elders in every town, as I directed you. 6 An elder must be blameless, faithful to his wife, a man whose children believe[b] and are not open to the charge of being wild and disobedient. 7 Since an overseer manages God’s household, he must be blameless—not overbearing, not quick-tempered, not given to drunkenness, not violent, not pursuing dishonest gain. 8 Rather, he must be hospitable, one who loves what is good, who is self-controlled, upright, holy and disciplined. 9 He must hold firmly to the trustworthy message as it has been taught, so that he can encourage others by sound doctrine and refute those who oppose it.”* (Titus 1:5-9). Titus is encouraged to appoint elders, but they must hold to high standards of morality, spirituality and personal conduct. They are after all to be examples to the rest of the body.

There are always those in the body who oppose sound teaching and doctrine, and who make it their business to sow discord and strife at every opportunity. Paul cautions Tutus to oppose these, to rebuke and correct them- always with the hope of restotration and return to the body of believers: *“For there are many rebellious people, full of meaningless talk and deception, especially those of the circumcision group. 11 They must be silenced, because they are disrupting whole households by teaching things they ought not to teach—and that for the sake of dishonest gain. 12 One of Crete’s own prophets has said it: “Cretans are always liars, evil brutes, lazy gluttons.” 13 This saying is true. Therefore rebuke them sharply, so that they will be sound in the faith 14 and will pay no attention to Jewish myths or to the merely human commands of those who reject the truth. 15 To the pure, all things are pure, but to those who are corrupted and do not believe, nothing is pure. In fact, both their minds and consciences are corrupted. 16 They claim to know God, but by their*

actions they deny him. They are detestable, disobedient and unfit for doing anything good." (Titus 1:10-16)

Jeremiah 31-32 November 1, 2014 Titus 2

The crowning chapter of Jeremiah- God reveals His plan for the people and for His covenant. Previously the covenant was all about the Law, all about outward obedience and only about the heart in passing. God now makes His intentions clear- once the restoration of the people to the land has been accomplished, He will do a great work among them- and create a new meaning for the covenant He established, and create a new relationship- one based on the heart. These verses have been a powerful influence in my life, as I remarried after a disastrous divorce. The covenant I had previously was broken beyond repair, and the desire of my heart was to start a new one- one that was based entirely on the attitudes of my heart. The verses about a covenant written not on tablets of stone but on the heart resonated with me as I embarked on a new covenant marriage, as they do still today. Perhaps I understand the emotional component of this renewal as well as anyone, and perhaps it is simalr to the feelings that our Creator felt at that time. God promises a "new covenant" with His people, after restoration of the people to the land: *"This is what the Lord Almighty, the God of Israel, says: "When I bring them back from captivity,[c] the people in the land of Judah and in its towns will once again use these words: 'The Lord bless you, you prosperous city, you sacred mountain.' 24 People will live together in Judah and all its towns—farmers and those who move about with their flocks. 25 I will refresh the weary and satisfy the faint."*

26 At this I awoke and looked around. My sleep had been pleasant to me.

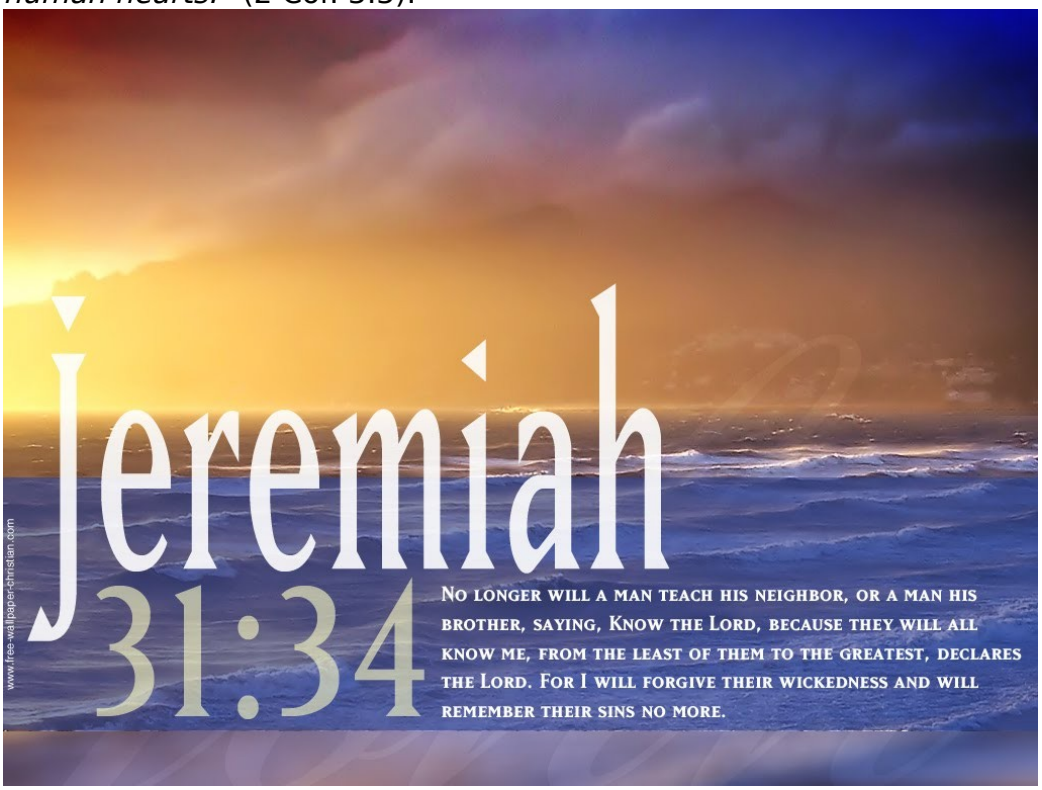
27 "The days are coming," declares the Lord, "when I will plant the kingdoms of Israel and Judah with the offspring of people and of animals. 28 Just as I watched over them to uproot and tear down, and to overthrow, destroy and bring disaster, so I will watch over them to build and to plant," declares the Lord. 29 "In those days people will no longer say,

'The parents have eaten sour grapes,
and the children's teeth are set on edge.'
30 Instead, everyone will die for their own sin; whoever eats sour grapes—their own teeth will be set on edge." (Jer. 31:23-30).

Then God describes to Jeremiah what this new covenant will be like. It is reminiscent of Deuteronomy 6, in which God instructs His people to medtate on the Law, to teach it to their children, to hold it in a central place in their hearts. Here He makes it clear that this new covenant is all about the heart- and heart relationships:
31 "The days are coming," declares the Lord,
"when I will make a new covenant
with the people of Israel
and with the people of Judah.
32 It will not be like the covenant
I made with their ancestors
when I took them by the hand

to lead them out of Egypt,
because they broke my covenant,
though I was a husband to[d] them,[e]”
declares the Lord.
33 “This is the covenant I will make with the people of Israel
after that time,” declares the Lord.
“I will put my law in their minds
and write it on their hearts.
I will be their God,
and they will be my people.
34 No longer will they teach their neighbor,
or say to one another, ‘Know the Lord,’
because they will all know me,
from the least of them to the greatest,”
declares the Lord.
“For I will forgive their wickedness
and will remember their sins no more.” (Jer. 31:31-34)

Paul picks up on this theme in his letter to the church in Corinth, saying to them: *“You show that you are a letter from Christ, the result of our ministry, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts.”* (2 Cor. 3:3).



http://wallpaper4god.com/en/wp-content/uploads/2011/09/Jeremiah-31-34.jpg

God promises to establish His Kingdom on the earth, one that will stand throughout time: *“The days are coming,” declares the Lord, “when this city will be rebuilt for me from the Tower of Hananel to the Corner Gate. 39 The measuring line will stretch from there straight to the hill of Gareb and then turn to Goah. 40 The whole valley*

where dead bodies and ashes are thrown, and all the terraces out to the Kidron Valley on the east as far as the corner of the Horse Gate, will be holy to the Lord. The city will never again be uprooted or demolished." (Jer. 31:38-40). Here the city of Jerusalem is a symbol of God's eternal presence on the earth- a testimony to His presence among us.

The text then returns to prose, as God instructs Jeremiah to purchase a field just before the fall of Jerusalem to Babylon. This field is itself a symbol of the restoration that is to come, and that id promised by God:
"In their presence I gave Baruch these instructions: 14 'This is what the Lord Almighty, the God of Israel, says: Take these documents, both the sealed and unsealed copies of the deed of purchase, and put them in a clay jar so they will last a long time. 15 For this is what the Lord Almighty, the God of Israel, says: Houses, fields and vineyards will again be bought in this land.'

16 "After I had given the deed of purchase to Baruch son of Neriah, I prayed to the Lord:

17 "Ah, Sovereign Lord, you have made the heavens and the earth by your great power and outstretched arm. Nothing is too hard for you. 18 You show love to thousands but bring the punishment for the parents' sins into the laps of their children after them. Great and mighty God, whose name is the Lord Almighty, 19 great are your purposes and mighty are your deeds. Your eyes are open to the ways of all mankind; you reward each person according to their conduct and as their deeds deserve. 20 You performed signs and wonders in Egypt and have continued them to this day, in Israel and among all mankind, and have gained the renown that is still yours. 21 You brought your people Israel out of Egypt with signs and wonders, by a mighty hand and an outstretched arm and with great terror. 22 You gave them this land you had sworn to give their ancestors, a land flowing with milk and honey. 23 They came in and took possession of it, but they did not obey you or follow your law; they did not do what you commanded them to do. So you brought all this disaster on them.

24 "See how the siege ramps are built up to take the city. Because of the sword, famine and plague, the city will be given into the hands of the Babylonians who are attacking it. What you said has happened, as you now see. 25 And though the city will be given into the hands of the Babylonians, you, Sovereign Lord, say to me, 'Buy the field with silver and have the transaction witnessed.'"

26 Then the word of the Lord came to Jeremiah: 27 "I am the Lord, the God of all mankind. Is anything too hard for me? 28 Therefore this is what the Lord says: I am about to give this city into the hands of the Babylonians and to Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon, who will capture it. 29 The Babylonians who are attacking this city will come in and set it on fire; they will burn it down, along with the houses where the people aroused my anger by burning incense on the roofs to Baal and by pouring out drink offerings to other gods." (Jer 32:13-29)

God then explains His plans for restoration of the land and His people: *"This is what the Lord says: As I have brought all this great calamity on this people, so I will give them all the prosperity I have promised them. 43 Once more fields will be bought in*

this land of which you say, 'It is a desolate waste, without people or animals, for it has been given into the hands of the Babylonians.' 44 Fields will be bought for silver, and deeds will be signed, sealed and witnessed in the territory of Benjamin, in the villages around Jerusalem, in the towns of Judah and in the towns of the hill country, of the western foothills and of the Negev, because I will restore their fortunes,[c] declares the Lord."(Jer 32:42-44). Just as God has allowed the calamity of invasion and captivity, he will restore the fortunes and well being of His people.

Titus 2

Some very pratical and "down to earth" is always helpful to God's people and the body of believers we call the "church". The day to day delaings with the problems and issues of being a Christian in an indifferent or even hostile world are the reality we all must face. Paul is very specific and practical in his adbice to Titus: *"You, however, must teach what is appropriate to sound doctrine. 2 Teach the older men to be temperate, worthy of respect, self-controlled, and sound in faith, in love and in endurance.*

3 Likewise, teach the older women to be reverent in the way they live, not to be slanderers or addicted to much wine, but to teach what is good. 4 Then they can urge the younger women to love their husbands and children, 5 to be self-controlled and pure, to be busy at home, to be kind, and to be subject to their husbands, so that no one will malign the word of God.

6 Similarly, encourage the young men to be self-controlled. 7 In everything set them an example by doing what is good. In your teaching show integrity, seriousness 8 and soundness of speech that cannot be condemned, so that those who oppose you may be ashamed because they have nothing bad to say about us." (Titus 2:1-8)
Both the old and young present different challenges to living the "life in the Spirit", and each need advice particular to their life stations.
Likewise the relationship of slaves and masters is dealth with*: "Teach slaves to be subject to their masters in everything, to try to please them, not to talk back to them, 10 and not to steal from them, but to show that they can be fully trusted, so that in every way they will make the teaching about God our Savior attractive."* (Titus 2:9-10). Once again, the Scripture is not promoting slavery, it is accepting that which is reality at the time.

Paul then makes a very important theological point- the power of the Holy Spirit is the power to say "No" to sin- the power to have ultimate victory over our sinful natures themselves: *"For the grace of God has appeared that offers salvation to all people. 12 It teaches us to say "No" to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age, 13 while we wait for the blessed hope—the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ, 14 who gave himself for us to redeem us from all wickedness and to purify for himself a people that are his very own, eager to do what is good.*

15 These, then, are the things you should teach. Encourage and rebuke with all authority. Do not let anyone despise you." (Titus 2:11-15). Paul also mentions that Titus should demand (and earn!) respect- he should not allow anyone to "despise" him!

Jeremiah 33-35 November 2, 2014 Titus 3

God gives Jeremiah another vision- while he is confined in the royal courtyard! God seems to have His own agenda, reaching out to His children when the time is right "in the fullness of time" (Gal. 4:4) regardless of our agenda- a humbling realization. God seems to be eager to communicate both the "good new" and the "bad news" with equal urgency. This is how He tells Jeremiah the news: "While Jeremiah was still confined in the courtyard of the guard, the word of the Lord came to him a second time: 2 "This is what the Lord says, he who made the earth, the Lord who formed it and established it—the Lord is his name: 3 'Call to me and I will answer you and tell you great and unsearchable things you do not know.' 4 For this is what the Lord, the God of Israel, says about the houses in this city and the royal palaces of Judah that have been torn down to be used against the siege ramps and the sword 5 in the fight with the Babylonians[a]: 'They will be filled with the dead bodies of the people I will slay in my anger and wrath. I will hide my face from this city because of all its wickedness.

6 "'Nevertheless, I will bring health and healing to it; I will heal my people and will let them enjoy abundant peace and security. 7 I will bring Judah and Israel back from captivity[b] and will rebuild them as they were before. 8 I will cleanse them from all the sin they have committed against me and will forgive all their sins of rebellion against me. 9 Then this city will bring me renown, joy, praise and honor before all nations on earth that hear of all the good things I do for it; and they will be in awe and will tremble at the abundant prosperity and peace I provide for it.' (Jer. 33:1-9)

God then makes two extraordinary promises: 1) he will bring a savior to the people; 2) the throne of David will never fail to have an inhabitant. To the Jewish recipient, these messages are about the "saving character" of God Himself, and the promise of a physical, human king in the line of David "forever". Lest we get caught up in the narrative of history and claim this wss not an accurate prophesy, we should look at the complete fulfilment of this prophesy- Jesus the Son. He was (and is!) the Savior- not only of God's chosen people but the world, and he- who is humanly and biologically in the line of David will reign forever! Here is God's amazing promise: 14 "'The days are coming,' declares the Lord, 'when I will fulfill the good promise I made to the people of Israel and Judah.

15 "'In those days and at that time
I will make a righteous Branch sprout from David's line;
he will do what is just and right in the land.
16 In those days Judah will be saved
and Jerusalem will live in safety.
This is the name by which it[c] will be called:
The Lord Our Righteous Savior.'
17 For this is what the Lord says: 'David will never fail to have a man to sit on the throne of Israel, 18 nor will the Levitical priests ever fail to have a man to stand before me continually to offer burnt offerings, to burn grain offerings and to present sacrifices.'"(Jer 33:14-18)

The “scoffers” who say that Gos has abandoned both Israel and Judah are answered by God’s affirmation of His power and rule over all of creation and His intentions to bless this people:
“The word of the Lord came to Jeremiah: 24 “Have you not noticed that these people are saying, ‘The Lord has rejected the two kingdoms[d] he chose’? So they despise my people and no longer regard them as a nation. 25 This is what the Lord says: ‘If I have not made my covenant with day and night and established the laws of heaven and earth, 26 then I will reject the descendants of Jacob and David my servant and will not choose one of his sons to rule over the descendants of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. For I will restore their fortunes[e] and have compassion on them.’” (Jer. 33:23-26)

Jeremiah then is told by God to warn Zedekiah that Babylon will indeed take the fortified city of Jerusalem, but Zedekiah is not to worry about his “future”- it is still in the control of God:
“While Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon and all his army and all the kingdoms and peoples in the empire he ruled were fighting against Jerusalem and all its surrounding towns, this word came to Jeremiah from the Lord: 2 “This is what the Lord, the God of Israel, says: Go to Zedekiah king of Judah and tell him, ‘This is what the Lord says: I am about to give this city into the hands of the king of Babylon, and he will burn it down. 3 You will not escape from his grasp but will surely be captured and given into his hands. You will see the king of Babylon with your own eyes, and he will speak with you face to face. And you will go to Babylon.

4 “‘Yet hear the Lord’s promise to you, Zedekiah king of Judah. This is what the Lord says concerning you: You will not die by the sword; 5 you will die peacefully. As people made a funeral fire in honor of your predecessors, the kings who ruled before you, so they will make a fire in your honor and lament, “Alas, master!” I myself make this promise, declares the Lord.’”

6 Then Jeremiah the prophet told all this to Zedekiah king of Judah, in Jerusalem, 7 while the army of the king of Babylon was fighting against Jerusalem and the other cities of Judah that were still holding out—Lachish and Azekah. These were the only fortified cities left in Judah.” (Jer 34:1-7).

The slaves were to be freed- presumably due to the impending disaster of military conquest and occupation by the Babylonian army. Gos had instructed the people to free their slaves on a recurring basis, but they ignored His instruction. Now the time had come to correct this: “The word came to Jeremiah from the Lord after King Zedekiah had made a covenant with all the people in Jerusalem to proclaim freedom for the slaves. 9 Everyone was to free their Hebrew slaves, both male and female; no one was to hold a fellow Hebrew in bondage. 10 So all the officials and people who entered into this covenant agreed that they would free their male and female slaves and no longer hold them in bondage. They agreed, and set them free. 11 But afterward they changed their minds and took back the slaves they had freed and enslaved them again.” (Jer. 34:8-11)

God then in His anger promsed the people that since they had not freed the slaves per the covenenat agreement, He would “free” the slaves for them- along with everyone else. The “freedom” for the rebellious masters of the slaves was to be a

grim one: “Then the word of the Lord came to Jeremiah: 13 “This is what the Lord, the God of Israel, says: I made a covenant with your ancestors when I brought them out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery. I said, 14 ‘Every seventh year each of you must free any fellow Hebrews who have sold themselves to you. After they have served you six years, you must let them go free.’[f] Your ancestors, however, did not listen to me or pay attention to me. 15 Recently you repented and did what is right in my sight: Each of you proclaimed freedom to your own people. You even made a covenant before me in the house that bears my Name. 16 But now you have turned around and profaned my name; each of you has taken back the male and female slaves you had set free to go where they wished. You have forced them to become your slaves again.

17 “Therefore this is what the Lord says: You have not obeyed me; you have not proclaimed freedom to your own people. So I now proclaim ‘freedom’ for you, declares the Lord—‘freedom’ to fall by the sword, plague and famine. I will make you abhorrent to all the kingdoms of the earth. 18 Those who have violated my covenant and have not fulfilled the terms of the covenant they made before me, I will treat like the calf they cut in two and then walked between its pieces. 19 The leaders of Judah and Jerusalem, the court officials, the priests and all the people of the land who walked between the pieces of the calf, 20 I will deliver into the hands of their enemies who want to kill them. Their dead bodies will become food for the birds and the wild animals.

21 “I will deliver Zedekiah king of Judah and his officials into the hands of their enemies who want to kill them, to the army of the king of Babylon, which has withdrawn from you. 22 I am going to give the order, declares the Lord, and I will bring them back to this city. They will fight against it, take it and burn it down. And I will lay waste the towns of Judah so no one can live there.” (Jer. 34:12-22)

God then deals with the Rekabites (http://pelicanflies.beginningofwisdom.net/other/uncategorized/2014/jehonadab-and-the-rekabites/). These descendants of Jehonadab son of Rekad had been told to be obedient to God’s Law and very distinctively “not to drink wine” (Jer. 35:15). The issue here is not drinking or not drinking wine but obedience to the Law and adherence to tradition. God holds these obedient people up as an example of the behavior that merits His continued blessing: “Then the word of the Lord came to Jeremiah, saying: 13 “This is what the Lord Almighty, the God of Israel, says: Go and tell the people of Judah and those living in Jerusalem, ‘Will you not learn a lesson and obey my words?’ declares the Lord. 14 ‘Jehonadab son of Rekab ordered his descendants not to drink wine and this command has been kept. To this day they do not drink wine, because they obey their forefather’s command. But I have spoken to you again and again, yet you have not obeyed me. 15 Again and again I sent all my servants the prophets to you. They said, “Each of you must turn from your wicked ways and reform your actions; do not follow other gods to serve them. Then you will live in the land I have given to you and your ancestors.” But you have not paid attention or listened to me. 16 The descendants of Jehonadab son of Rekab have carried out the command their forefather gave them, but these people have not obeyed me.’

17 “Therefore this is what the Lord God Almighty, the God of Israel, says: ‘Listen! I am going to bring on Judah and on everyone living in Jerusalem every disaster I pronounced against them. I spoke to them, but they did not listen; I called to them, but they did not answer.’”

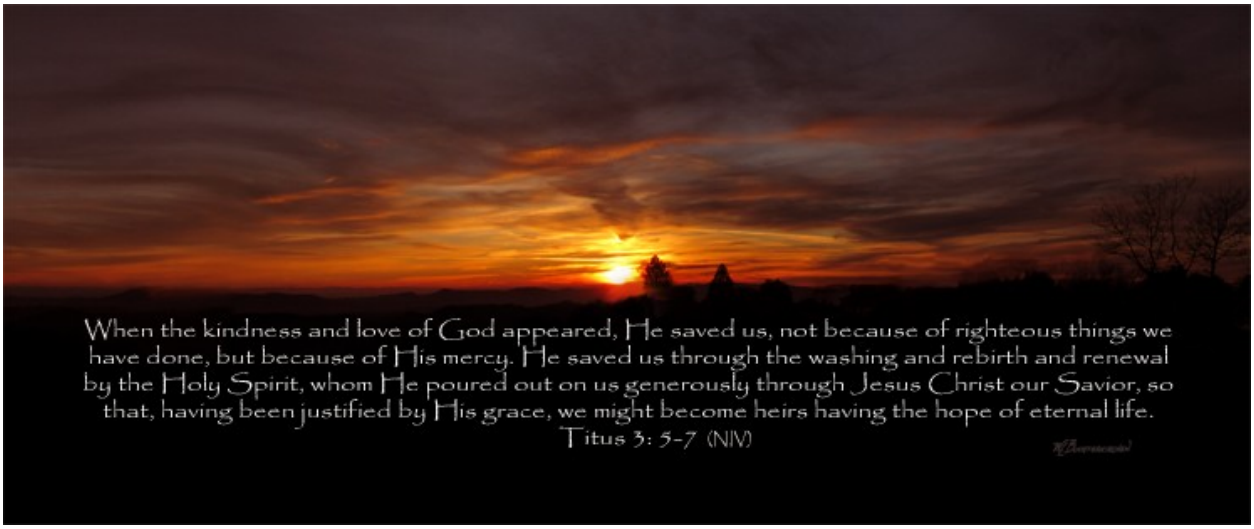
18 Then Jeremiah said to the family of the Rekabites, “This is what the Lord Almighty, the God of Israel, says: ‘You have obeyed the command of your forefather Jehonadab and have followed all his instructions and have done everything he ordered.’ 19 Therefore this is what the Lord Almighty, the God of Israel, says: ‘Jehonadab son of Rekab will never fail to have a descendant to serve me.’” (Jer 35:12-19)

Titus 3

Paul then advises Titus to “respect authority”- something I find personally very difficult to do when the “authorities” seem so narcissistic, self- serving and politically “offensive” to me (can you say “Progressives”, boys and girls…?) Probably the best I can do is pray for all our leaders both in the civic, political and religious realms. I know that God can change their hearts, I pray often that he will! Titus is instructed to simply “obey” the civil authorities that God has allowed to have power over him: *“Remind the people to be subject to rulers and authorities, to be obedient, to be ready to do whatever is good, 2 to slander no one, to be peaceable and considerate, and always to be gentle toward everyone.”* (Titus 3:1-2).

Titus is then given “final instructions” in this brief pastoral letter. Paul reminds him of the perils and pitfalls of those who would argue endlessly and pointlessly over “geneaology” and “points of the law”; these controversies are to be avoided because of the disruption they cause to the unity of the body of believers: *“At one time we too were foolish, disobedient, deceived and enslaved by all kinds of passions and pleasures. We lived in malice and envy, being hated and hating one another. 4 But when the kindness and love of God our Savior appeared, 5 he saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy. He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit, 6 whom he poured out on us generously through Jesus Christ our Savior, 7 so that, having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs having the hope of eternal life. 8 This is a trustworthy saying. And I want you to stress these things, so that those who have trusted in God may be careful to devote themselves to doing what is good. These things are excellent and profitable for everyone.*

9 But avoid foolish controversies and genealogies and arguments and quarrels about the law, because these are unprofitable and useless. 10 Warn a divisive person once, and then warn them a second time. After that, have nothing to do with them. 11 You may be sure that such people are warped and sinful; they are self-condemned.” (Titus 3:3-11)



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Paul then asks for a few personal favors and gives final instructions. He is always one who preferred to be with those he loved, nurtured and mentored in person, but realized that he was called so serve "many" and to plant and nurture/disciple churches as God directed (Gal. 1:11-12; 15-16): *"As soon as I send Artemas or Tychicus to you, do your best to come to me at Nicopolis, because I have decided to winter there. 13 Do everything you can to help Zenas the lawyer and Apollos on their way and see that they have everything they need. 14 Our people must learn to devote themselves to doing what is good, in order to provide for urgent needs and not live unproductive lives. 15 Everyone with me sends you greetings. Greet those who love us in the faith. Grace be with you all."* (Titus 3: 12-15)

Jeremiah 36-37 November 3, 2014 Philemon

What to do with God's Word? Trust it, reject it, follow it wholeheartedly or partially, ignore it (at least the parts we don't like or agree with) or accept it all as authoritative? Baruch agreed to deliver the "scroll" to Jehoiakim - a scroll summarizing all the dire prophesies and warnings that God had issued to Jeremiah. And the king's response was to systematically cut it into pieces and burn it in the fire he kept in the inner chambers: *"20 After they put the scroll in the room of Elishama the secretary, they went to the king in the courtyard and reported everything to him. 21 The king sent Jehudi to get the scroll, and Jehudi brought it from the room of Elishama the secretary and read it to the king and all the officials standing beside him. 22 It was the ninth month and the king was sitting in the winter apartment, with a fire burning in the firepot in front of him. 23 Whenever Jehudi had read three or four columns of the scroll, the king cut them off with a scribe's knife and threw them into the firepot, until the entire scroll was burned in the fire. 24 The king and all his attendants who heard all these words showed no fear, nor did they tear their clothes. 25 Even though Elnathan, Delaiah and Gemariah urged the king not to burn the scroll, he would not listen to them. 26 Instead, the king commanded Jerahmeel, a son of the king, Seraiah son of Azriel and Shelemiah son of Abdeel to arrest Baruch the scribe and Jeremiah the prophet. But the Lord had hidden them."* (Jer. 36:20-26)

God's response was sure and swift- he declared that the king would be removed from power and from the flow of history, and his body desecrated. This is the great risk, and the great peril we put our very soulds in when we belligerently and deliberately ignore God's Word! The Scriptures tell us*: "After the king burned the scroll containing the words that Baruch had written at Jeremiah's dictation, the word of the Lord came to Jeremiah: 28 "Take another scroll and write on it all the words that were on the first scroll, which Jehoiakim king of Judah burned up. 29 Also tell Jehoiakim king of Judah, 'This is what the Lord says: You burned that scroll and said, "Why did you write on it that the king of Babylon would certainly come and destroy this land and wipe from it both man and beast?" 30 Therefore this is what the Lord says about Jehoiakim king of Judah: He will have no one to sit on the throne of David; his body will be thrown out and exposed to the heat by day and the frost by night. 31 I will punish him and his children and his attendants for their wickedness; I will bring on them and those living in Jerusalem and the people of Judah every disaster I pronounced against them, because they have not listened.'"*

32 So Jeremiah took another scroll and gave it to the scribe Baruch son of Neriah, and as Jeremiah dictated, Baruch wrote on it all the words of the scroll that Jehoiakim king of Judah had burned in the fire. And many similar words were added to them." (Jer 36:27-32).

God's will was realized, and the succession of kings from Jehoiakim to Jehoiachin and Zedekiah took place. Even though the "characters" had changed, the succession of kings still ignored God's Word- despite the incredible circumstances in their reign. Everything God had promised to do had been done, and yet they still ignored Him, much to their peril: *"Zedekiah son of Josiah was made king of Judah by Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon; he reigned in place of Jehoiachin[a] son of Jehoiakim. 2 Neither he nor his attendants nor the people of the land paid any attention to the words the LORD had spoken through Jeremiah the prophet."* (Jer. 37:1-2) Jeremiah, though, was then imprisoned for being faithful and courageous to procleaim God's Word- just as the countless martyrs have been since the church began on the earth. *"Jeremiah was imprisoned and almost forgotten- but not by God! Jeremiah was put into a vaulted cell in a dungeon, where he remained a long time. 17 Then King Zedekiah sent for him and had him brought to the palace, where he asked him privately, "Is there any word from the Lord?"*

"Yes," Jeremiah replied, "you will be delivered into the hands of the king of Babylon."

18 Then Jeremiah said to King Zedekiah, "What crime have I committed against you or your attendants or this people, that you have put me in prison? 19 Where are your prophets who prophesied to you, 'The king of Babylon will not attack you or this land'? 20 But now, my lord the king, please listen. Let me bring my petition before you: Do not send me back to the house of Jonathan the secretary, or I will die there."

21 King Zedekiah then gave orders for Jeremiah to be placed in the courtyard of the guard and given a loaf of bread from the street of the bakers each day until all the

bread in the city was gone. So Jeremiah remained in the courtyard of the guard." (Jer. 37:16-21)

Philemon

A short letter, asking a favor from a friend. Why would such a writing find its way into the Scripture? Surely there could be nothing worth being stamped as the authoritative Word of God Himsel! Yet if we read this letter by Paul we immediately see several things worthy of our study and meditation: 1) the institution of slavery which is roundly criticized by critics as being tacitly accepted by the Scriptures, is held up to examination and found wanting; 2) the intercession for a brother in the Lord, here by letter- but undoubtedly accompanied by much prayer- is an example to the believer for our intercessions; 3) the gentle persuasion and logic of Paul's petition is a reminder of the "persuasion" and (mostly) gently correction of the Lord to us.
Here is the letter:

1 Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother,

To Philemon our dear friend and fellow worker— 2 also to Apphia our sister and Archippus our fellow soldier—and to the church that meets in your home:

3 Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Thanksgiving and Prayer
4 I always thank my God as I remember you in my prayers, 5 because I hear about your love for all his holy people and your faith in the Lord Jesus. 6 I pray that your partnership with us in the faith may be effective in deepening your understanding of every good thing we share for the sake of Christ. 7 Your love has given me great joy and encouragement, because you, brother, have refreshed the hearts of the Lord's people.

Paul's Plea for Onesimus
8 Therefore, although in Christ I could be bold and order you to do what you ought to do, 9 yet I prefer to appeal to you on the basis of love. It is as none other than Paul—an old man and now also a prisoner of Christ Jesus— 10 that I appeal to you for my son Onesimus, who became my son while I was in chains. 11 Formerly he was useless to you, but now he has become useful both to you and to me.

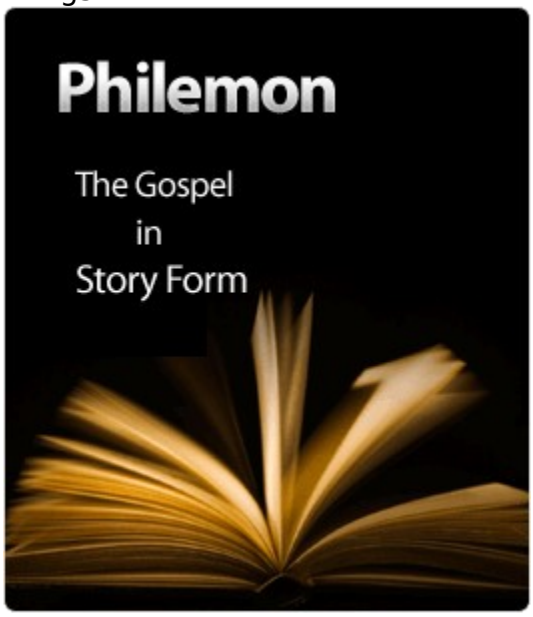
12 I am sending him—who is my very heart—back to you. 13 I would have liked to keep him with me so that he could take your place in helping me while I am in chains for the gospel. 14 But I did not want to do anything without your consent, so that any favor you do would not seem forced but would be voluntary. 15 Perhaps the reason he was separated from you for a little while was that you might have him back forever— 16 no longer as a slave, but better than a slave, as a dear brother. He is very dear to me but even dearer to you, both as a fellow man and as a brother in the Lord.

17 So if you consider me a partner, welcome him as you would welcome me. 18 If he has done you any wrong or owes you anything, charge it to me. 19 I, Paul, am writing this with my own hand. I will pay it back—not to mention that you owe me your very self. 20 I do wish, brother, that I may have some benefit from you in the Lord; refresh my heart in Christ. 21 Confident of your obedience, I write to you, knowing that you will do even more than I ask.

22 And one thing more: Prepare a guest room for me, because I hope to be restored to you in answer to your prayers.

23 Epaphras, my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus, sends you greetings. 24 And so do Mark, Aristarchus, Demas and Luke, my fellow workers.

25 The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit.
Once a slave, now a "partner" (verse 17); once someone unknown to Paul, now someone that is escribed as Paul's own "heart" (verse 12). Someone who was "useless" who became "useful" (verse 11). We do not know the outcome of this please for Onesimus, but I am certain that Paul's petitionary letter, accompanied by the power of intercessory prayer and the very Sprit of God, accomplished wonderful things!



http://www.settingcaptivesfree.com/courses/philemon/

Jeremiah 38-39 November 4, 2014 Hebrews 1

Jeremiah faithfully proclaimed what God directed him to say, and the consequences were often adverse fior this faithful prophet. Some of the "leading citizens" (http://ancientwordtour.wordpress.com/2012/08/01/seals-of-jeremiahs-captors-discovered/) took their case to the king, saying that Jeremiah was a force of discouragement for the people and the army of Judah, and should be oput to death. The king agreed to let them have their way in punishing him, but instead of killing Jeremiah they had him put in a cistern filled mostly with mud. Did God prevent Jeremiah's death? Perhaps, although He could raise up any number of prophets in Jeremiah's place. We remember the words of Jesus when ordered to make the

people quiet their cries of “Hosannah”. Jesus declared that if they were quiet, the very stones would cry out (Luke 19:40): *“Shephatiah son of Mattan, Gedaliah son of Pashhur, Jehukal[a] son of Shelemiah, and Pashhur son of Malkijah heard what Jeremiah was telling all the people when he said, 2 “This is what the Lord says: ‘Whoever stays in this city will die by the sword, famine or plague, but whoever goes over to the Babylonians[b] will live. They will escape with their lives; they will live.’ 3 And this is what the Lord says: ‘This city will certainly be given into the hands of the army of the king of Babylon, who will capture it.’”*

4 Then the officials said to the king, “This man should be put to death. He is discouraging the soldiers who are left in this city, as well as all the people, by the things he is saying to them. This man is not seeking the good of these people but their ruin.”

5 “He is in your hands,” King Zedekiah answered. “The king can do nothing to oppose you.”

6 So they took Jeremiah and put him into the cistern of Malkijah, the king’s son, which was in the courtyard of the guard. They lowered Jeremiah by ropes into the cistern; it had no water in it, only mud, and Jeremiah sank down into the mud.” (Jer 38:1-6)

Then a Cushite, of all people, who was an official in the court, pointed out to the king that this action was tantamount to a death sentence- Jeremiah could not esacpe and would starve or die of thirst. The king wisely decided to extricate Jeremiah from his peril: *“But Ebed-Melek, a Cushite,[c] an official[d] in the royal palace, heard that they had put Jeremiah into the cistern. While the king was sitting in the Benjamin Gate, 8 Ebed-Melek went out of the palace and said to him, 9 “My lord the king, these men have acted wickedly in all they have done to Jeremiah the prophet. They have thrown him into a cistern, where he will starve to death when there is no longer any bread in the city.”*

10 Then the king commanded Ebed-Melek the Cushite, “Take thirty men from here with you and lift Jeremiah the prophet out of the cistern before he dies.”

11 So Ebed-Melek took the men with him and went to a room under the treasury in the palace. He took some old rags and worn-out clothes from there and let them down with ropes to Jeremiah in the cistern. 12 Ebed-Melek the Cushite said to Jeremiah, “Put these old rags and worn-out clothes under your arms to pad the ropes.” Jeremiah did so, 13 and they pulled him up with the ropes and lifted him out of the cistern. And Jeremiah remained in the courtyard of the guard.” (Jer. 38:7-13)

One reason the king saved Jeremiah was to ask- once again- what God’s counsel was to him. Jeremiah, understandably suspicious because of his recent near death experience, was fearful that the king would hand him over to his enemies if he was truthful. The king convinced him that he would be safe, and Jeremiah again relayed the Lord’s message to the king: *“Then King Zedekiah sent for Jeremiah the prophet and had him brought to the third entrance to the temple of the Lord. “I am going to ask you something,” the king said to Jeremiah. “Do not hide anything from me.”*

15 Jeremiah said to Zedekiah, “If I give you an answer, will you not kill me? Even if I did give you counsel, you would not listen to me.”

16 But King Zedekiah swore this oath secretly to Jeremiah: “As surely as the Lord lives, who has given us breath, I will neither kill you nor hand you over to those who want to kill you.”

17 Then Jeremiah said to Zedekiah, “This is what the Lord God Almighty, the God of Israel, says: ‘If you surrender to the officers of the king of Babylon, your life will be spared and this city will not be burned down; you and your family will live. 18 But if you will not surrender to the officers of the king of Babylon, this city will be given into the hands of the Babylonians and they will burn it down; you yourself will not escape from them.’”

19 King Zedekiah said to Jeremiah, “I am afraid of the Jews who have gone over to the Babylonians, for the Babylonians may hand me over to them and they will mistreat me.”

20 “They will not hand you over,” Jeremiah replied. “Obey the Lord by doing what I tell you. Then it will go well with you, and your life will be spared. 21 But if you refuse to surrender, this is what the Lord has revealed to me: 22 All the women left in the palace of the king of Judah will be brought out to the officials of the king of Babylon. Those women will say to you:

“‘They misled you and overcame you—
those trusted friends of yours.
Your feet are sunk in the mud;
your friends have deserted you.’
23 “All your wives and children will be brought out to the Babylonians. You yourself will not escape from their hands but will be captured by the king of Babylon; and this city will[e] be burned down.”

*24 Then Zedekiah said to Jeremiah, “Do not let anyone know about this conversation, or you may die. 25 If the officials hear that I talked with you, and they come to you and say, ‘Tell us what you said to the king and what the king said to you; do not hide it from us or we will kill you,’ 26 then tell them, ‘I was pleading with the king not to send me back to Jonathan’s house to die there.’”(*Jer. 38:14-26)

Jeremiah 39 is a narrative about the fall of Jerusalem. It is accurate historically as well as spiritually, as archaeology and science have confirmed (http://www.antiquities.org.il/Article_eng.aspx?sec_id=25&subj_id=240&id=2010&hist=1)
The siege lasted about two years, and the consequences for Zedekiah were horrendous. The cruelty of the conquering Babylonian army was legendary, and they did nothing to diminish their savage reputation by ther actions at this point in history: *“1 In the ninth year of Zedekiah king of Judah, in the tenth month, Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon marched against Jerusalem with his whole army and laid siege to it. 2 And on the ninth day of the fourth month of Zedekiah’s eleventh year, the city wall was broken through. 3 Then all the officials of the king of Babylon came and took seats in the Middle Gate: Nergal-Sharezer of Samgar, Nebo-*

Sarsekim a chief officer, Nergal-Sharezer a high official and all the other officials of the king of Babylon. 4 When Zedekiah king of Judah and all the soldiers saw them, they fled; they left the city at night by way of the king's garden, through the gate between the two walls, and headed toward the Arabah.[a]

5 But the Babylonian[b] army pursued them and overtook Zedekiah in the plains of Jericho. They captured him and took him to Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon at Riblah in the land of Hamath, where he pronounced sentence on him. 6 There at Riblah the king of Babylon slaughtered the sons of Zedekiah before his eyes and also killed all the nobles of Judah. 7 Then he put out Zedekiah's eyes and bound him with bronze shackles to take him to Babylon." (Jer. 39:1-7). Zedekiah, instead of surrendering, tied to run- with disastrous consequences (https://oneyeardevotional.wordpress.com/tag/zedekiah/).

Because of God's protection and to honor His Word given to Jeremiah, the prophet was captured but treated well by Nebuchadnezzar*: "Now Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon had given these orders about Jeremiah through Nebuzaradan commander of the imperial guard: 12 "Take him and look after him; don't harm him but do for him whatever he asks." 13 So Nebuzaradan the commander of the guard, Nebushazban a chief officer, Nergal-Sharezer a high official and all the other officers of the king of Babylon 14 sent and had Jeremiah taken out of the courtyard of the guard. They turned him over to Gedaliah son of Ahikam, the son of Shaphan, to take him back to his home. So he remained among his own people.*

15 While Jeremiah had been confined in the courtyard of the guard, the word of the Lord came to him: 16 "Go and tell Ebed-Melek the Cushite, 'This is what the Lord Almighty, the God of Israel, says: I am about to fulfill my words against this city—words concerning disaster, not prosperity. At that time they will be fulfilled before your eyes. 17 But I will rescue you on that day, declares the Lord; you will not be given into the hands of those you fear. 18 I will save you; you will not fall by the sword but will escape with your life, because you trust in me, declares the Lord.'" (Jer. 39:11-18)

Hebrews 1

It is impossible to read, discuss, or even seriously study Hebews without entering into the theological concepts of Christology- who was Jesus, why did He come, what is His nature and what relationship does He properly have with the Father and with us? (Please see a summary at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Christology). The anonymous writer to the Hebrew believers- the "completed Jews"- Jews who had discovered their Messiah to be Jeshua ben Joseph- was concerned that the Hebrews understood and were taught correct doctrine about Jesus. The whole of chapter 1 is an argument or discussion about the superiority of Jesus and His ministry and sacrifice over that found in the Old Covenent. God chose to send us "His best"- the perfect image of Himself- in the form of Jesus His Son*: "In the past God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets at many times and in various ways, 2 but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom also he made the universe. 3 The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word. After he had provided purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the*

Majesty in heaven. 4 So he became as much superior to the angels as the name he has inherited is superior to theirs." (Heb. 1:1-4)

Jesus is superior to the angels (who are created beings): *"For to which of the angels did God ever say,*

"You are my Son;
today I have become your Father"?
Or again,

"I will be his Father,
and he will be my Son"?
6 And again, when God brings his firstborn into the world, he says,

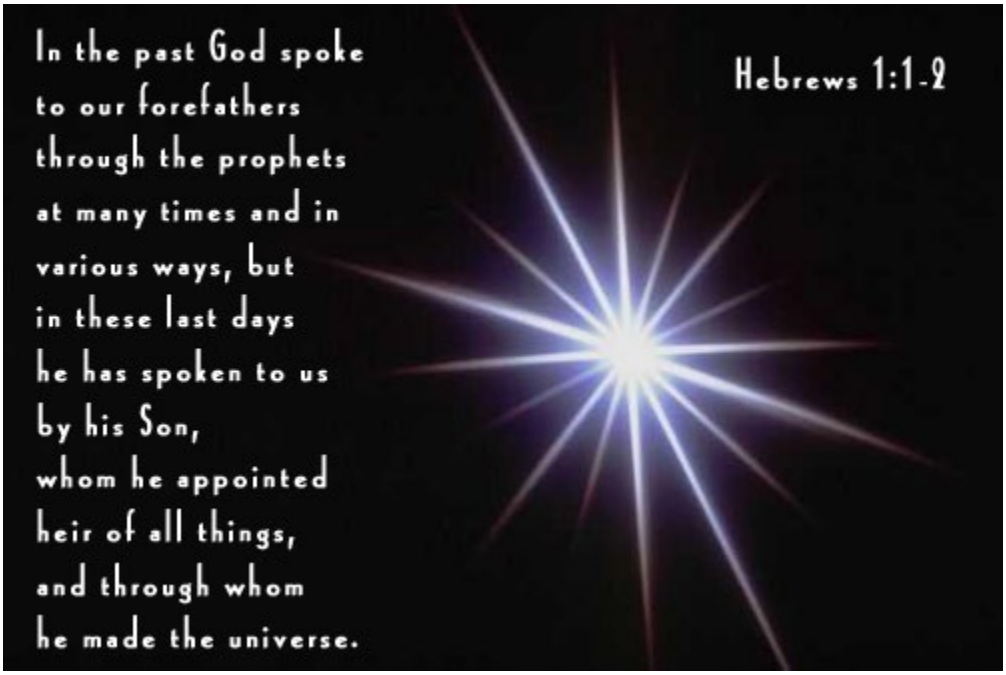
"Let all God's angels worship him."
7 In speaking of the angels he says,

"He makes his angels spirits,
and his servants flames of fire."
8 But about the Son he says,

"Your throne, O God, will last for ever and ever;
a scepter of justice will be the scepter of your kingdom.
9 You have loved righteousness and hated wickedness;
therefore God, your God, has set you above your companions
by anointing you with the oil of joy." (Heb. 1:5-9)

Jesus was a co-creator of the universe, and was present with the rest of the Godhead at creation: *"In the beginning, Lord, you laid the foundations of the earth,*
and the heavens are the work of your hands.
11 They will perish, but you remain;
they will all wear out like a garment.
12 You will roll them up like a robe;
like a garment they will be changed.
But you remain the same,
and your years will never end."
13 To which of the angels did God ever say,

"Sit at my right hand
until I make your enemies
a footstool for your feet"?
14 Are not all angels ministering spirits sent to serve those who will inherit salvation?" (Heb. 1:10-14). And perhaps most significantly, Jesus is the source both of our joy (verse 9) and salvation (verse 3) through the "purification of our sins".



http://dwellingintheword.wordpress.com/2013/11/25/1191-hebrews-1/

Jeremiah 40-42 November 5, 2014 Hebrews 2

After the exiles had left for Babylon, only a few "lower class" folks were left behind (Jer. 39:10). Because the Babylonian officials realized that God was punishing the Israelites and principally because God had promised Jeremiah release from captivity (Jer. 39:17-18), one of the officials named Nebuzaradan, the commander of the imperial guard, allowed Jeremiah to leave custody and return to his country of origin: *"The word came to Jeremiah from the Lord after Nebuzaradan commander of the imperial guard had released him at Ramah. He had found Jeremiah bound in chains among all the captives from Jerusalem and Judah who were being carried into exile to Babylon. 2 When the commander of the guard found Jeremiah, he said to him, "The Lord your God decreed this disaster for this place. 3 And now the Lord has brought it about; he has done just as he said he would. All this happened because you people sinned against the Lord and did not obey him. 4 But today I am freeing you from the chains on your wrists. Come with me to Babylon, if you like, and I will look after you; but if you do not want to, then don't come. Look, the whole country lies before you; go wherever you please." 5 However, before Jeremiah turned to go, [a] Nebuzaradan added, "Go back to Gedaliah son of Ahikam, the son of Shaphan, whom the king of Babylon has appointed over the towns of Judah, and live with him among the people, or go anywhere else you please."the king of Babylon has appointed over the towns of Judah, and live with him among the people, or go anywhere else you please."*

Then the commander gave him provisions and a present and let him go. 6 So Jeremiah went to Gedaliah son of Ahikam at Mizpah and stayed with him among the people who were left behind in the land." (Jer. 40:1-6)

Gedeliah had been appointed as ruler of those "left behind" in Judah. Almost immediately, intrigue and plotting began swirling around this appointed leader.

Gedeliah had pledged to cooperate with the invading conquerers, and apparently believed that resistance at this point, and without God's favor, would be pointless: *"Gedaliah son of Ahikam, the son of Shaphan, took an oath to reassure them and their men. "Do not be afraid to serve the Babylonians,[c]" he said. "Settle down in the land and serve the king of Babylon, and it will go well with you. 10 I myself will stay at Mizpah to represent you before the Babylonians who come to us, but you are to harvest the wine, summer fruit and olive oil, and put them in your storage jars, and live in the towns you have taken over."* (Jer. 40:9-10). Of course appointment by the enemy and submission to their authority do not generate many "good feelings" among those in captivity toward the newly appointed leader. Johanan, an officer in the Judean army, even offered Gedeliah his services in eliminating an "enemy" for Gedeliah- Ishmael who was supposedly "sent by the Ammonites to take his life": *"Johanan son of Kareah and all the army officers still in the open country came to Gedaliah at Mizpah 14 and said to him, "Don't you know that Baalis king of the Ammonites has sent Ishmael son of Nethaniah to take your life?" But Gedaliah son of Ahikam did not believe them.*

15 Then Johanan son of Kareah said privately to Gedaliah in Mizpah, "Let me go and kill Ishmael son of Nethaniah, and no one will know it. Why should he take your life and cause all the Jews who are gathered around you to be scattered and the remnant of Judah to perish?"

16 But Gedaliah son of Ahikam said to Johanan son of Kareah, "Don't do such a thing! What you are saying about Ishmael is not true." (Jer. 40:13-16)

Despite Gealiah's conviction that Ishmael was not plotting against him, the very thing that was predicted by Johanan came true- Ishmael assassinated Gedeliah: *"In the seventh month Ishmael son of Nethaniah, the son of Elishama, who was of royal blood and had been one of the king's officers, came with ten men to Gedaliah son of Ahikam at Mizpah. While they were eating together there, 2 Ishmael son of Nethaniah and the ten men who were with him got up and struck down Gedaliah son of Ahikam, the son of Shaphan, with the sword, killing the one whom the king of Babylon had appointed as governor over the land. 3 Ishmael also killed all the men of Judah who were with Gedaliah at Mizpah, as well as the Babylonian[a] soldiers who were there."* (Jer. 41:1-3)

Then in a strange sequence of events, eighty men who were mourning the loss of their national freedom and identity by shaving their beards, making sacrifices and trearing their clothing, came to make sacrifices in the Temple. Ishmael saw them as a threat and had them all killed and their bodies dumped in a cistern: *"The day after Gedaliah's assassination, before anyone knew about it, 5 eighty men who had shaved off their beards, torn their clothes and cut themselves came from Shechem, Shiloh and Samaria, bringing grain offerings and incense with them to the house of the Lord. 6 Ishmael son of Nethaniah went out from Mizpah to meet them, weeping as he went. When he met them, he said, "Come to Gedaliah son of Ahikam." 7 When they went into the city, Ishmael son of Nethaniah and the men who were with him slaughtered them and threw them into a cistern. 8 But ten of them said to Ishmael, "Don't kill us! We have wheat and barley, olive oil and honey, hidden in a field." So he let them alone and did not kill them with the others. 9 Now the cistern where he threw all the bodies of the men he had killed along with Gedaliah was the*

one King Asa had made as part of his defense against Baasha king of Israel. Ishmael son of Nethaniah filled it with the dead." (Jer. 41:4-9)

Ishmael essentially took over the city of Mizpah by force, and the word of his "crimes" reached Johanan, who attempted to wrestle control away from Ishmael, but Ishmael and a few of his loyal men successfully escaped to his native country of the Ammonites: *"Ishmael made captives of all the rest of the people who were in Mizpah—the king's daughters along with all the others who were left there, over whom Nebuzaradan commander of the imperial guard had appointed Gedaliah son of Ahikam. Ishmael son of Nethaniah took them captive and set out to cross over to the Ammonites.*

11 When Johanan son of Kareah and all the army officers who were with him heard about all the crimes Ishmael son of Nethaniah had committed, 12 they took all their men and went to fight Ishmael son of Nethaniah. They caught up with him near the great pool in Gibeon. 13 When all the people Ishmael had with him saw Johanan son of Kareah and the army officers who were with him, they were glad. 14 All the people Ishmael had taken captive at Mizpah turned and went over to Johanan son of Kareah. 15 But Ishmael son of Nethaniah and eight of his men escaped from Johanan and fled to the Ammonites." (Jer. 41:10-15)

Johanan then led some of the people he had rescued in a flight to Egypt, hoping to escape the conquering Babylonians: *"Then Johanan son of Kareah and all the army officers who were with him led away all the people of Mizpah who had survived, whom Johanan had recovered from Ishmael son of Nethaniah after Ishmael had assassinated Gedaliah son of Ahikam—the soldiers, women, children and court officials he had recovered from Gibeon. 17 And they went on, stopping at Geruth Kimham near Bethlehem on their way to Egypt 18 to escape the Babylonians.[b] They were afraid of them because Ishmael son of Nethaniah had killed Gedaliah son of Ahikam, whom the king of Babylon had appointed as governor over the land."* (Jer. 41:16-18). They understandably feared a Babylonian reprisal, since the governor appointed by the Babylonians had been assassinated and they all feared reprisal. The Babylonians might not be careful to distinguish the actions os an Ammonite- Ishmael- from those of the Hebrew people!

Johanan sough out the counsel of Jeremiah before leaving for Egypt, and asked Jeremiah to consult the Lord and to ask for protection for this small "remnant" of Judah. The advice he got was not at all what he expected- God seemed to be putting Johanan's faith- and the faith of those with him- to the test. Would they obey the Lord and stay in Judah despite their fears, or would they flee?: *"Then all the army officers, including Johanan son of Kareah and Jezaniah[a] son of Hoshaiah, and all the people from the least to the greatest approached 2 Jeremiah the prophet and said to him, "Please hear our petition and pray to the Lord your God for this entire remnant. For as you now see, though we were once many, now only a few are left. 3 Pray that the Lord your God will tell us where we should go and what we should do."*

4 "I have heard you," replied Jeremiah the prophet. "I will certainly pray to the Lord your God as you have requested; I will tell you everything the Lord says and will keep nothing back from you."

5 Then they said to Jeremiah, “May the Lord be a true and faithful witness against us if we do not act in accordance with everything the Lord your God sends you to tell us. 6 Whether it is favorable or unfavorable, we will obey the Lord our God, to whom we are sending you, so that it will go well with us, for we will obey the Lord our God.”

7 Ten days later the word of the Lord came to Jeremiah. 8 So he called together Johanan son of Kareah and all the army officers who were with him and all the people from the least to the greatest. 9 He said to them, “This is what the Lord, the God of Israel, to whom you sent me to present your petition, says: 10 ‘If you stay in this land, I will build you up and not tear you down; I will plant you and not uproot you, for I have relented concerning the disaster I have inflicted on you. 11 Do not be afraid of the king of Babylon, whom you now fear. Do not be afraid of him, declares the Lord, for I am with you and will save you and deliver you from his hands. 12 I will show you compassion so that he will have compassion on you and restore you to your land.’ (Jer. 42:1-12)

The consequence for fleeing the land and disobeying God would be severe. Once again God is making an object lesson about obedience, and the consequences of disobedience. If the people did not stay and disobeyed the Lord, dire consequences would follow: *“However, if you say, ‘We will not stay in this land,’ and so disobey the Lord your God, 14 and if you say, ‘No, we will go and live in Egypt, where we will not see war or hear the trumpet or be hungry for bread,’ 15 then hear the word of the Lord, you remnant of Judah. This is what the Lord Almighty, the God of Israel, says: ‘If you are determined to go to Egypt and you do go to settle there, 16 then the sword you fear will overtake you there, and the famine you dread will follow you into Egypt, and there you will die. 17 Indeed, all who are determined to go to Egypt to settle there will die by the sword, famine and plague; not one of them will survive or escape the disaster I will bring on them.’”* (Jer. 42:13-17)

Hebrews 2

The Scriptures teach us that “faith comes through hearing” (Rom. 10:17), and the writer of Hebrews assures us that we should “pay careful attention” to what we have heard. God has sent His Spirit to us, and the Spirit was acoompanied by sings and wonders, bearing testimony of the powere and importance of the words of faith and very giving of the Spirit that accompanied the faith that was produced. God spoke, we received faith and the gifts of the very Spirit of God: *“We must pay the most careful attention, therefore, to what we have heard, so that we do not drift away. 2 For since the message spoken through angels was binding, and every violation and disobedience received its just punishment, 3 how shall we escape if we ignore so great a salvation? This salvation, which was first announced by the Lord, was confirmed to us by those who heard him. 4 God also testified to it by signs, wonders and various miracles, and by gifts of the Holy Spirit distributed according to his will.”* (Heb. 2:1-4)

A complicated argument follows- 1) God did not intend the angels to rule over the earth in the “days to come”; 2) mankind is “lower than” the angels (Psalm 8); 3) Jesus, who for a time was “lower than the angels” – as we are(Psalm 8:5) is the true

inheritor of God's blessings- He will rule over the earth: *"It is not to angels that he has subjected the world to come, about which we are speaking. 6 But there is a place where someone has testified:*

"What is mankind that you are mindful of them,
a son of man that you care for him?
7 You made them a little lower than the angels;
you crowned them with glory and honor
8 and put everything under their feet."
In putting everything under them, God left nothing that is not subject to them. Yet at present we do not see everything subject to them. 9 But we do see Jesus, who was made lower than the angels for a little while, now crowned with glory and honor because he suffered death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone." (Heb. 2:5-9)

Back to Christology for a moment. Here we see very clear evidence from the Scripture that Jesus was "fully human:- He claimed that we humans are His "brothers" and "sisters" and all in the same "family" – He was tempted as we are so He can truly help us because He has experienced what we have in temptation: *"In bringing many sons and daughters to glory, it was fitting that God, for whom and through whom everything exists, should make the pioneer of their salvation perfect through what he suffered. 11 Both the one who makes people holy and those who are made holy are of the same family. So Jesus is not ashamed to call them brothers and sisters. 12 He says,*

"I will declare your name to my brothers and sisters;
in the assembly I will sing your praises."
13 And again,

"I will put my trust in him."
And again he says,

"Here am I, and the children God has given me."
14 Since the children have flesh and blood, he too shared in their humanity so that by his death he might break the power of him who holds the power of death—that is, the devil— 15 and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death. 16 For surely it is not angels he helps, but Abraham's descendants. 17 For this reason he had to be made like them, fully human in every way, in order that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in service to God, and that he might make atonement for the sins of the people. 18 Because he himself suffered when he was tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted." (Heb. 2:10-18)

http://reversingverses.com/2012/10/24/hebrews-218/

Jeremiah 43-45 November 6, 2014 Hebrews 3

Johanan continued to refuse to surrender to the Babylonians, even though jeremiah assured him that this was God's will for him. He, as we often do, insisted on his "own way" and trusted his own experience rather than the revealed Word from the Lord. He fled to Egypt, and God promised that he and those with him would be punished for their willful disobedience:
"When Jeremiah had finished telling the people all the words of the Lord their God—everything the Lord had sent him to tell them— 2 Azariah son of Hoshaiah and Johanan son of Kareah and all the arrogant men said to Jeremiah, "You are lying! The Lord our God has not sent you to say, 'You must not go to Egypt to settle there.' 3 But Baruch son of Neriah is inciting you against us to hand us over to the Babylonians, so they may kill us or carry us into exile to Babylon."

4 So Johanan son of Kareah and all the army officers and all the people disobeyed the Lord's command to stay in the land of Judah. 5 Instead, Johanan son of Kareah and all the army officers led away all the remnant of Judah who had come back to live in the land of Judah from all the nations where they had been scattered. 6 They also led away all those whom Nebuzaradan commander of the imperial guard had left with Gedaliah son of Ahikam, the son of Shaphan—the men, the women, the children and the king's daughters. And they took Jeremiah the prophet and Baruch son of Neriah along with them. 7 So they entered Egypt in disobedience to the Lord and went as far as Tahpanhes." (Jer 43:1-7). Tahpanes was a prominent city on ancient Egypt (please see: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tahpanhes)

Jeremiah was the unwilling traveler with those fleeing to Egypt, and when in Egypt God's word came to Jeremiah and God instructed him to "illustrate" graphically what was to happen to those who were now in Egypt: *"In Tahpanhes the word of the*

Lord came to Jeremiah: 9 “While the Jews are watching, take some large stones with you and bury them in clay in the brick pavement at the entrance to Pharaoh’s palace in Tahpanhes. 10 Then say to them, ‘This is what the Lord Almighty, the God of Israel, says: I will send for my servant Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon, and I will set his throne over these stones I have buried here; he will spread his royal canopy above them. 11 He will come and attack Egypt, bringing death to those destined for death, captivity to those destined for captivity, and the sword to those destined for the sword. 12 He will set fire to the temples of the gods of Egypt; he will burn their temples and take their gods captive. As a shepherd picks his garment clean of lice, so he will pick Egypt clean and depart. 13 There in the temple of the sun in Egypt he will demolish the sacred pillars and will burn down the temples of the gods of Egypt.’” (Jer. 43:8-13)

God addresses the Jews living in Egypt- telling them that he has not speared those who sought after “other gods” in Judah. Why, then, should he spare His children in Egypt doing the same thing? His warning is clear and direct: *“This word came to Jeremiah concerning all the Jews living in Lower Egypt—in Migdol, Tahpanhes and Memphis—and in Upper Egypt: 2 “This is what the Lord Almighty, the God of Israel, says: You saw the great disaster I brought on Jerusalem and on all the towns of Judah. Today they lie deserted and in ruins 3 because of the evil they have done. They aroused my anger by burning incense to and worshiping other gods that neither they nor you nor your ancestors ever knew. 4 Again and again I sent my servants the prophets, who said, ‘Do not do this detestable thing that I hate!’ 5 But they did not listen or pay attention; they did not turn from their wickedness or stop burning incense to other gods. 6 Therefore, my fierce anger was poured out; it raged against the towns of Judah and the streets of Jerusalem and made them the desolate ruins they are today.”* (Jer. 44:1-6). The Law knows no geographic boundaries- God is everywhere (omnipresent) and His Laws, rules, regulations and commands know no geographic or cultural boundaries.

God again promises that those who are willfully disobedient to Him will not escape punishment and harm: *“Then Jeremiah said to all the people, including the women, “Hear the word of the Lord, all you people of Judah in Egypt. 25 This is what the Lord Almighty, the God of Israel, says: You and your wives have done what you said you would do when you promised, ‘We will certainly carry out the vows we made to burn incense and pour out drink offerings to the Queen of Heaven.’*

“Go ahead then, do what you promised! Keep your vows! 26 But hear the word of the Lord, all you Jews living in Egypt: ‘I swear by my great name,’ says the Lord, ‘that no one from Judah living anywhere in Egypt will ever again invoke my name or swear, “As surely as the Sovereign Lord lives.” 27 For I am watching over them for harm, not for good; the Jews in Egypt will perish by sword and famine until they are all destroyed. 28 Those who escape the sword and return to the land of Judah from Egypt will be very few. Then the whole remnant of Judah who came to live in Egypt will know whose word will stand—mine or theirs.

29 “‘This will be the sign to you that I will punish you in this place,’ declares the Lord, ‘so that you will know that my threats of harm against you will surely stand.’ 30 This is what the Lord says: ‘I am going to deliver Pharaoh Hophra king of Egypt into the hands of his enemies who want to kill him, just as I gave Zedekiah king of

Judah into the hands of Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon, the enemy who wanted to kill him.'" (Jer. 44:24-30). The "women" were in the practice of burining incense and pouring out drink offerings to the Queen of Heaven (verses 18 and 25), a practice that they believed would bring them prosperity

God then sends a message of encouragement to Baruch, who faithfully transcribed the words of God's messages for jermeiah. He, like us, was sometimes "weary from doing good" (Gal 6:9), and needed this encouragement from the Lord: *"When Baruch son of Neriah wrote on a scroll the words Jeremiah the prophet dictated in the fourth year of Jehoiakim son of Josiah king of Judah, Jeremiah said this to Baruch: 2 "This is what the Lord, the God of Israel, says to you, Baruch: 3 You said, 'Woe to me! The Lord has added sorrow to my pain; I am worn out with groaning and find no rest.' 4 But the Lord has told me to say to you, 'This is what the Lord says: I will overthrow what I have built and uproot what I have planted, throughout the earth. 5 Should you then seek great things for yourself? Do not seek them. For I will bring disaster on all people, declares the Lord, but wherever you go I will let you escape with your life.'"* (Jer. 45:1-4) (Please see the commentary in http://quaillake.blogspot.com/2007/05/gods-comfort-to-baruch-jeremiah-45.html)

Hebrews 3

The argument was just made about Jesus being superior to the angels. Now the author of Hebrews begins the discussion about Jesus' superiority to Moses (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Moses) . This is certainly not a trivila matter- Moses is regaded by Hebrew scholars and ethicists as a giant in the spiritual arena (http://www.chabad.org/parshah/article_cdo/aid/1153/jewish/Moses-The-Birth-of-a-Leader.htm) . Moses' name is mentioned more times in scripture than any other, second only to Jesus (http://bibleq.net/answer/4373/) . The author here clearly shows how Jesus is superior to Moses, not only in His very nature but also in the realm of His influence and authority: *"Therefore, holy brothers and sisters, who share in the heavenly calling, fix your thoughts on Jesus, whom we acknowledge as our apostle and high priest. 2 He was faithful to the one who appointed him, just as Moses was faithful in all God's house. 3 Jesus has been found worthy of greater honor than Moses, just as the builder of a house has greater honor than the house itself. 4 For every house is built by someone, but God is the builder of everything. 5 "Moses was faithful as a servant in all God's house," bearing witness to what would be spoken by God in the future. 6 But Christ is faithful as the Son over God's house. And we are his house, if indeed we hold firmly to our confidence and the hope in which we glory."* (Hebrews 3:1-6)

Moses' leadership was paramount to the physical and moral survival of his people. Yet even Moses could not conquer the unbelieving hearts and stubborn resistance of his people. Here we are warned about the perils and dangers of an unbelieveing heart. It is critical what we believe, and the things that make up our faith. Each item must be measured against the ethical and moral standards of Scripture, and each must be part of a consistent whole: *"See to it, brothers and sisters, that none of you has a sinful, unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God. 13 But encourage one another daily, as long as it is called "Today," so that none of you may be hardened by sin's deceitfulness. 14 We have come to share in Christ, if*

indeed we hold our original conviction firmly to the very end. 15 As has just been said:
"Today, if you hear his voice,
do not harden your hearts
as you did in the rebellion."
16 Who were they who heard and rebelled? Were they not all those Moses led out of Egypt? 17 And with whom was he angry for forty years? Was it not with those who sinned, whose bodies perished in the wilderness? 18 And to whom did God swear that they would never enter his rest if not to those who disobeyed? 19 So we see that they were not able to enter, because of their unbelief." (Hebrews 3:12-19). We who wish to enter into God's blessed "rest" (verse 18) must be careful to be pliable, open and willing servants of His!

http://b.vimeocdn.com/ts/158/261/15826131_640.jpg

Jeremiah 46-48 November 7, 2014 Hebrews 4

Jeremiah 46-48 in summary is a series of judgments against Egypt, the Philistines, and Moab. Why would God reveal this awesome destruction and judgment to Jeremiah, and have Jeremiah pass these grim and graphic descriptions on to the people? What would be the benefit of their hearing such words of judgment and destruction? The answer is simple- justice! God is certainly merciful, forgiving, caring and full of grace. God, however is also righteous and just, and the (deserved) penalty for sin is death. In the sacrificial system, the death of an animal- and the shedding of its lifeblood, "covered" sin. Leviticus 17:11 spells this out: *"For the life of a creature is in the blood, and I have given it to you to make atonement*

for yourselves on the altar; it is the blood that makes atonement for one's life." (Leviticus 17:11) However, there were other offerings that God accepted for "covering" of sin: " In Leviticus 5:11-13, it states, *'If, however, he cannot afford two doves or two young pigeons, he is to bring as an offering for his sin a tenth of an ephah of fine flour for a sin offering.'* In Jonah 3:10, we also see that one does not need a blood sacrifice for the forgiveness of sins. There, the Bible simply states that Gd saw the works of the people of Niniveh. Specifically it says that these works consisted of abandoning their evil ways, and because they did, Gd forgave them." (http://www.whatjewsbelieve.org/explanation2.html)

The "covering of sin" with the blood of slain animals was temporary and a type of the prefect sacrifice of Jesus which led to forgiveness of sin: "*God required animal sacrifices to provide a temporary covering of sins and to foreshadow the perfect and complete sacrifice of Jesus Christ (Leviticus 4:35, 5:10). Animal sacrifice is an important theme found throughout Scripture because "without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness" (Hebrews 9:22). When Adam and Eve sinned, animals were killed by God to provide clothing for them (Genesis 3:21). Cain and Abel brought sacrifices to the Lord. Cain's was unacceptable because he brought fruit, while Abel's was acceptable because it was the "firstborn of his flock" (Genesis 4:4-5). After the flood receded, Noah sacrificed animals to God". (Genesis 8:20-21).* Read more: http://www.gotquestions.org/animal-sacrifices.html#ixzz3ImTbGzmm

So in succession, God condemns and predicts destruction for Egypt- at the hands of Babylon, the Philistines, and Moab. About Egypt: *"The Lord Almighty, the God of Israel, says: "I am about to bring punishment on Amon god of Thebes, on Pharaoh, on Egypt and her gods and her kings, and on those who rely on Pharaoh. 26 I will give them into the hands of those who want to kill them—Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon and his officers. Later, however, Egypt will be inhabited as in times past," declares the Lord."* (Jer. 46:25-26).

About the Philistines God has this to say: *"This is the word of the Lord that came to Jeremiah the prophet concerning the Philistines before Pharaoh attacked Gaza:*
2 This is what the Lord says:
"See how the waters are rising in the north;
they will become an overflowing torrent.
They will overflow the land and everything in it,
the towns and those who live in them.
The people will cry out;
all who dwell in the land will wail
3 at the sound of the hooves of galloping steeds,
at the noise of enemy chariots
and the rumble of their wheels.
Parents will not turn to help their children;
their hands will hang limp.
4 For the day has come
to destroy all the Philistines
and to remove all survivors
who could help Tyre and Sidon.
The Lord is about to destroy the Philistines,
the remnant from the coasts of Caphtor." (Jer 47:1-4)

And the Moabites will meet a similar fate: Concerning Moab:
This is what the Lord Almighty, the God of Israel, says:
"Woe to Nebo, for it will be ruined.
Kiriathaim will be disgraced and captured;
the stronghold[c] will be disgraced and shattered.
2 Moab will be praised no more;
in Heshbon[d] people will plot her downfall:
'Come, let us put an end to that nation.'
You, the people of Madmen,[e] will also be silenced;
the sword will pursue you.
3 Cries of anguish arise from Horonaim,
cries of great havoc and destruction.
4 Moab will be broken;
her little ones will cry out.[f]
5 They go up the hill to Luhith,
weeping bitterly as they go;
on the road down to Horonaim
anguished cries over the destruction are heard.
6 Flee! Run for your lives;
become like a bush[g] in the desert.
7 Since you trust in your deeds and riches,
you too will be taken captive,
and Chemosh will go into exile,
together with his priests and officials.
8 The destroyer will come against every town,
and not a town will escape.
The valley will be ruined
and the plateau destroyed,
because the Lord has spoken." (Jer. 48 1-8)
For more detail, including the history of these conquests, please see (http://www.biblestudytools.com/commentaries/jamieson-fausset-brown/jeremiah/jeremiah-46.html).

Hebrews 4

Hebrews then provides a somewhat detailed discussion about a topic that for years was a complete mystery to me- the "believer's rest". In a trivial sense I have longed for "rest"- especially in the overcrowded, over scheduled and over committed life that I lead. Many times I bemoan the fact that the Sabbath- for Christians, Sunday- the first day of the week- is no longer a day of rest but of hurrisome and worrisome activity. Sometimes I am so consumed with the "work of the Lord" – or more accurately what I perceive as the "work of the Lord" - than the "Lord of the work". I remember a bumber sticker that is slightly but humorously irreverent- *"Jesus is Coming! - Look Busy!"*. God rested after the work of the six days of Creation, and we should as well.

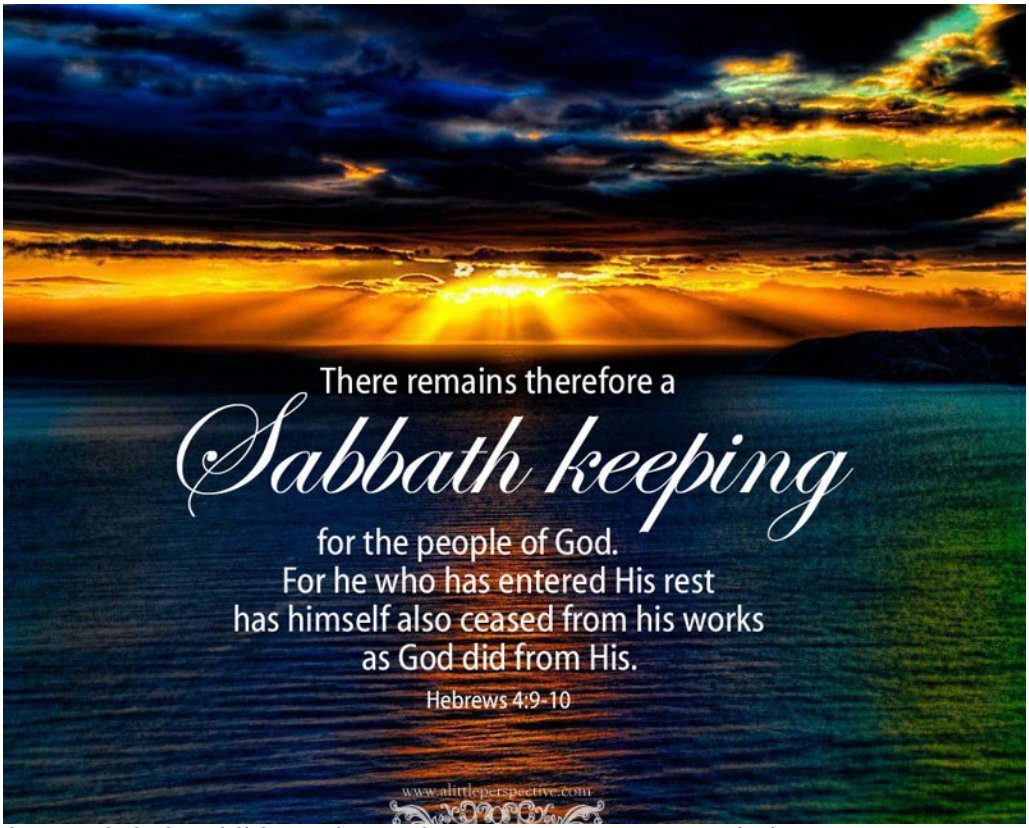
This "believer's rest" though, is more than rest from labor. It is entering into the transforming and transfiguring warmth and peace of the very presence of God Himself! Many of us crave it, few of us even take the time to allow ourselves to

experience it. It is a blessed and special time and place when we enter- we meet and are met by the very Creator of all the universe, who loves us beyond our comprehension! A wonderful "landmark" sermon by Sturgeon presented this wonderful and often overlooked reality: http://www.spurgeongems.org/vols55-57/chs3169.pdf.

The writer of Hebrews teaches us about this "rest": *"Therefore, since the promise of entering his rest still stands, let us be careful that none of you be found to have fallen short of it. 2 For we also have had the good news proclaimed to us, just as they did; but the message they heard was of no value to them, because they did not share the faith of those who obeyed. 3 Now we who have believed enter that rest, just as God has said,*
"So I declared on oath in my anger,
'They shall never enter my rest.'"
And yet his works have been finished since the creation of the world. 4 For somewhere he has spoken about the seventh day in these words: "On the seventh day God rested from all his works." 5 And again in the passage above he says, "They shall never enter my rest."
6 Therefore since it still remains for some to enter that rest, and since those who formerly had the good news proclaimed to them did not go in because of their disobedience, 7 God again set a certain day, calling it "Today." This he did when a long time later he spoke through David, as in the passage already quoted:
"Today, if you hear his voice,
do not harden your hearts."
8 For if Joshua had given them rest, God would not have spoken later about another day. 9 There remains, then, a Sabbath-rest for the people of God; 10 for anyone who enters God's rest also rests from their works, just as God did from his. 11 Let us, therefore, make every effort to enter that rest, so that no one will perish by following their example of disobedience." (Heb. 4:1-11)

Hebrews then teaches us about the power and "penetrating ability" of God's Word: *"For the word of God is alive and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart. 13 Nothing in all creation is hidden from God's sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give account."* (Heb. 4:12-13)

Then Hebrews presents an unmistakably vivid picture of Jesus as high priest for us. Just as the high priest (and he alone!) went into the "holy of holies", Jesus as our high priest leads the way for us to commune directly with God: *"Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has ascended into heaven, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to the faith we profess. 15 For we do not have a high priest who is unable to empathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet he did not sin. 16 Let us then approach God's throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need."* (Heb. 4:14-16)



http://christinesbiblestudy.wordpress.com/2013/12/19/hebrews-4/

Jeremiah 49-50 November 8,,2014 Hebrews 5

The prophecies against the nations surrounding Israel/Judah continues. God, in turn, speaks words of judgment and punishments againt Ammon, Edom. Damascus, Kedar, Hazor, Elam, and finally against Babylon. These nations were not in a covenant relationship with God, but they were still accountable for their evil and evil practices. It is true that God uses pagan nations and indivifdulas to accomplish he goals- such as Pharaoh and Egypt- but all are accountable for their sins.

First God gives words of judgment to Ammon:
“1 Concerning the Ammonites:
This is what the Lord says:
“Has Israel no sons?
Has Israel no heir?
Why then has Molek[a] taken possession of Gad?
Why do his people live in its towns?
2 But the days are coming,”
declares the Lord,
“when I will sound the battle cry
against Rabbah of the Ammonites;
it will become a mound of ruins,
and its surrounding villages will be set on fire.
Then Israel will drive out

those who drove her out,”
says the Lord.
3 “Wail, Heshbon, for Ai is destroyed!
Cry out, you inhabitants of Rabbah!
Put on sackcloth and mourn;
rush here and there inside the walls,
for Molek will go into exile,
together with his priests and officials.” (Jer. 49:1-3).

Then Edom is condemned:
7 Concerning Edom:
This is what the Lord Almighty says:
“Is there no longer wisdom in Teman?
Has counsel perished from the prudent?
Has their wisdom decayed?
8 Turn and flee, hide in deep caves,
you who live in Dedan,
for I will bring disaster on Esau
at the time when I punish him.
9 If grape pickers came to you,
would they not leave a few grapes?
If thieves came during the night,
would they not steal only as much as they wanted?
10 But I will strip Esau bare;
I will uncover his hiding places,
so that he cannot conceal himself.
His armed men are destroyed,
also his allies and neighbors,
so there is no one to say,
11 ‘Leave your fatherless children; I will keep them alive.
Your widows too can depend on me.’” (Jer. 49:7-11)
Remember that Esau (“Red”) was the forefather of the Edomites (http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/History/Edomites.html)

Then Damascus, an ancient city still populated and extant today, receives the full measure of God’s anger and judgment:
“Concerning Damascus:
“Hamath and Arpad are dismayed,
for they have heard bad news.
They are disheartened,
troubled like[d] the restless sea.
24 Damascus has become feeble,
she has turned to flee
and panic has gripped her;
anguish and pain have seized her,
pain like that of a woman in labor.
25 Why has the city of renown not been abandoned,
the town in which I delight?
26 Surely, her young men will fall in the streets;
all her soldiers will be silenced in that day,”

declares the Lord Almighty.
27 “I will set fire to the walls of Damascus;
it will consume the fortresses of Ben-Hadad.” (Jer. 49:23-27)

The walled city kingdoms of Kedar and Hazor are similarly told of their imminent punishment and judgment (see http://biblehub.com/commentaries/jeremiah/49-28.htm):
“28 Concerning Kedar and the kingdoms of Hazor, which Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon attacked:
This is what the Lord says:
“Arise, and attack Kedar
and destroy the people of the East.
29 Their tents and their flocks will be taken;
their shelters will be carried off
with all their goods and camels.
People will shout to them,
‘Terror on every side!’
30 “Flee quickly away!
Stay in deep caves, you who live in Hazor,”
declares the Lord.
“Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon has plotted against you;
he has devised a plan against you.
31 “Arise and attack a nation at ease,
which lives in confidence,”
declares the Lord,
“a nation that has neither gates nor bars;
its people live far from danger.
32 Their camels will become plunder,
and their large herds will be spoils of war.
I will scatter to the winds those who are in distant places[e]
and will bring disaster on them from every side,”
declares the Lord.
33 “Hazor will become a haunt of jackals,
a desolate place forever.
No one will live there;
no people will dwell in it.” (Jer. 49:28-33)

Then Elam is listed among those nations to be punished:
“34 This is the word of the Lord that came to Jeremiah the prophet concerning Elam, early in the reign of Zedekiah king of Judah:
35 This is what the Lord Almighty says:
“See, I will break the bow of Elam,
the mainstay of their might.
36 I will bring against Elam the four winds
from the four quarters of heaven;
I will scatter them to the four winds,
and there will not be a nation
where Elam’s exiles do not go.
37 I will shatter Elam before their foes,
before those who want to kill them;

I will bring disaster on them,
even my fierce anger,”
declares the Lord.
“I will pursue them with the sword
until I have made an end of them.
38 I will set my throne in Elam
and destroy her king and officials,”
declares the Lord.
39 “Yet I will restore the fortunes of Elam
in days to come,”
declares the Lord.” (Jer. 49:34-39)

Finally, chapter 50 of the book of Jeremiah details the judgment on Babylon. Perhaps the length and detail of this prophecy is an indication of the depth of sin and depravity that God found in this nation, mighty in battle but weak and defiant in its true spirituality:
“This is the word the Lord spoke through Jeremiah the prophet concerning Babylon and the land of the Babylonians:
2 “Announce and proclaim among the nations,
lift up a banner and proclaim it;
keep nothing back, but say,
‘Babylon will be captured;
Bel will be put to shame,
Marduk filled with terror.
Her images will be put to shame
and her idols filled with terror.’
3 A nation from the north will attack her
and lay waste her land.
No one will live in it;
both people and animals will flee away.
4 “In those days, at that time,”
declares the Lord,
“the people of Israel and the people of Judah together
will go in tears to seek the Lord their God.
5 They will ask the way to Zion
and turn their faces toward it.
They will come and bind themselves to the Lord
in an everlasting covenant
that will not be forgotten. (Jer. 50:1-5)
Finally, order has been restored. Babylon and Marduk (and Bel) will all be punished and shown to be in error, and the people of God will once more be restored. They will return to their Land of promise, and once more seek God’s face and honir His name!

Hebrews 5

A final piece of the Christology in Hebrews is seen here, where Jesus is declared to be a high priest “in the order of Melchizadek”. Melchizadek, you may rememeber, was the priest that Abram sacrificed to on his return from battle with Kedorlaomer (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Melchizedek):

“After Abram returned from defeating Kedorlaomer and the kings allied with him, the king of Sodom came out to meet him in the Valley of Shaveh (that is, the King’s Valley).

18 Then Melchizedek king of Salem brought out bread and wine. He was priest of God Most High, 19 and he blessed Abram, saying,

“Blessed be Abram by God Most High,
Creator of heaven and earth.
20 And praise be to God Most High,
who delivered your enemies into your hand.”

Then Abram gave him a tenth of everything.” (Gen. 14:17-20)

Melchizadek is also identified as the “King of Salem”, and is not in the blood line of the priests, whose line originated with Aaron, the brother of Moses. He was not a Levite, so his office has authority from another source, namely God Himself. Jesus is therefore a priest, but not in the sense either by blood or function as the Levitical priests. His office and authority are superior to those in the Levitical order: *“Every high priest is selected from among the people and is appointed to represent the people in matters related to God, to offer gifts and sacrifices for sins. 2 He is able to deal gently with those who are ignorant and are going astray, since he himself is subject to weakness. 3 This is why he has to offer sacrifices for his own sins, as well as for the sins of the people. 4 And no one takes this honor on himself, but he receives it when called by God, just as Aaron was.*
5 In the same way, Christ did not take on himself the glory of becoming a high priest. But God said to him,
“You are my Son;
today I have become your Father.”
6 And he says in another place,
“You are a priest forever,
in the order of Melchizedek.”
7 During the days of Jesus’ life on earth, he offered up prayers and petitions with fervent cries and tears to the one who could save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission. 8 Son though he was, he learned obedience from what he suffered 9 and, once made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him 10 and was designated by God to be high priest in the order of Melchizedek.” (Heb. 5:1-10)

Meeting of Abraham and Melchizedek — by Dieric Bouts the Elder, 1464–67

Then comes a passage reminiscent of one from the Pauline letter to the Corinthians (1 Cor. 3:2) describing the "meat and milk" of the Gospel. Infants, still not mature, are given the easily digestible and completer nutrition of milk, whereas mature Christians deal with more substantive "food", since they are ready for a more challenging, complex, and difficult to digest "food". The witer of Hebrews reminds us that we are expected to mature in Christ and not remain as infants- in a senese he is telling the people to "grow up"!: *"11 We have much to say about this, but it is hard to make it clear to you because you no longer try to understand. 12 In fact, though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you the elementary truths of God's word all over again. You need milk, not solid food! 13 Anyone who lives on milk, being still an infant, is not acquainted with the teaching about righteousness. 14 But solid food is for the mature, who by constant use have trained themselves to distinguish good from evil."* (Heb. 5:11-14)

Jeremiah 51-52 November 9, 2014 Hebrews 6

There is always a fascination with the destruction of what was once seemingly mighty and invincible. A very popular novel written in the 1950s "Alas Babylon" alludes to this morbid fascination and terror we have with the destruction of the mighty and powerful. The title of this novel was take from the verse in revelation, which also alludes to the destruction described in this passage of Jeremiah (Rev. 18:10) *"Alas, alas, that great city Babylon, that mighty city! for in one hour is thy judgment come."* (KJV) The amazingly powerful nation/kingdom of Babylon was a tower of strength and influence, was once able to exert its will on neighbors at a whim. Now the fall of this once mighty nation is prophesied by Jeremiah:

“1 This is what the Lord says:
“See, I will stir up the spirit of a destroyer
against Babylon and the people of Leb Kamai.[a]
2 I will send foreigners to Babylon
to winnow her and to devastate her land;
they will oppose her on every side
in the day of her disaster.
3 Let not the archer string his bow,
nor let him put on his armor.
Do not spare her young men;
completely destroy[b] her army.
4 They will fall down slain in Babylon,[c]
fatally wounded in her streets.
5 For Israel and Judah have not been forsaken
by their God, the Lord Almighty,
though their land[d] is full of guilt
before the Holy One of Israel.
6 “Flee from Babylon!
Run for your lives!
Do not be destroyed because of her sins.
It is time for the Lord’s vengeance;
he will repay her what she deserves.” (Jer. 51:1-6)

It is important to realize that the Lord Himself is the author of this judgment and catastrophic end to this pagan nation. He alone is worthy and wise enough to properly administer justice and judgment:
“The Lord Almighty has sworn by himself:
I will surely fill you with troops, as with a swarm of locusts,
and they will shout in triumph over you.
15 “He made the earth by his power;
he founded the world by his wisdom
and stretched out the heavens by his understanding.
16 When he thunders, the waters in the heavens roar;
he makes clouds rise from the ends of the earth.
He sends lightning with the rain
and brings out the wind from his storehouses.” (Jer 51:14-16)

God is destroying this once mighty nation right “before your eyes” of His people as well as the other people of the nations surrounding. He is making an object lesson of this nation- disobedience leads to destruction and death!:
24 “Before your eyes I will repay Babylon and all who live in Babylonia[e] for all the wrong they have done in Zion,” declares the Lord.

25 “I am against you, you destroying mountain,
you who destroy the whole earth,”
declares the Lord.
“I will stretch out my hand against you,
roll you off the cliffs,
and make you a burned-out mountain.
26 No rock will be taken from you for a cornerstone,

nor any stone for a foundation,
for you will be desolate forever,”
declares the Lord.
27 “Lift up a banner in the land!
Blow the trumpet among the nations!
Prepare the nations for battle against her;
summon against her these kingdoms:
Ararat, Minni and Ashkenaz.
Appoint a commander against her;
send up horses like a swarm of locusts.
28 Prepare the nations for battle against her—
the kings of the Medes,
their governors and all their officials,
and all the countries they rule.
29 The land trembles and writhes,
for the Lord’s purposes against Babylon stand—
to lay waste the land of Babylon
so that no one will live there.” (Jer. 51:24-29)

The punishment is just, and the reason given is disobedience leading to the killing of God’s own people. The “slain of Israel” are being vindicated and God’s vengeance and wrath is being *exerted on this nation:*
“Babylon must fall because of Israel’s slain,
just as the slain in all the earth
have fallen because of Babylon.
50 You who have escaped the sword,
leave and do not linger!
Remember the Lord in a distant land,
and call to mind Jerusalem.” (Jer. 51:49-50)

The summary of all this prophecy is given at the end of this chapter. Jeremiah has now faithfully proclaimed all that God has told him, and his words- and mission as a prophet- are completed. He will still be a leader and an advocate for his people, but he has now moved on to another role: *“This is the message Jeremiah the prophet gave to the staff officer Seraiah son of Neriah, the son of Mahseiah, when he went to Babylon with Zedekiah king of Judah in the fourth year of his reign. 60 Jeremiah had written on a scroll about all the disasters that would come upon Babylon—all that had been recorded concerning Babylon. 61 He said to Seraiah, “When you get to Babylon, see that you read all these words aloud. 62 Then say, ‘Lord, you have said you will destroy this place, so that neither people nor animals will live in it; it will be desolate forever.’ 63 When you finish reading this scroll, tie a stone to it and throw it into the Euphrates. 64 Then say, ‘So will Babylon sink to rise no more because of the disaster I will bring on her. And her people will fall.’” The words of Jeremiah end here.”* (Jer. 51:59-64) His present ro ended, but he will continue to write (Lamentations) and be engaged in the spiritual life of his people http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jeremiah)

The text in Jeremiah 52, the last chapter in this book, then turns to prose. This chapter is a summary of the historical events surrounding the fall of Jerusalem and the subsequent exile of the people to Babylon. The book of Lamentations, also

accredited to Jeremiah, is a series of poetic laments about the state of captivity the people of Judah encountered in Babylon. God has not forgotten His people- he has indicated time and again through Jeremiah that He will (and does) reign supreme over all the affairs of the nations, but the time has not yet come for the fulfilment of that prophesy.

According to Scripture, it was Zedekiah's rebellion and refusal to turn to God that led to the fall of Jerusalem to Babylon. The Scriptural account is given this way: *"Zedekiah was twenty-one years old when he became king, and he reigned in Jerusalem eleven years. His mother's name was Hamutal daughter of Jeremiah; she was from Libnah. 2 He did evil in the eyes of the Lord, just as Jehoiakim had done. 3 It was because of the Lord's anger that all this happened to Jerusalem and Judah, and in the end he thrust them from his presence.*

Now Zedekiah rebelled against the king of Babylon.

4 So in the ninth year of Zedekiah's reign, on the tenth day of the tenth month, Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon marched against Jerusalem with his whole army. They encamped outside the city and built siege works all around it. 5 The city was kept under siege until the eleventh year of King Zedekiah.

6 By the ninth day of the fourth month the famine in the city had become so severe that there was no food for the people to eat. 7 Then the city wall was broken through, and the whole army fled. They left the city at night through the gate between the two walls near the king's garden, though the Babylonians[a] were surrounding the city. They fled toward the Arabah,[b] 8 but the Babylonian[c] army pursued King Zedekiah and overtook him in the plains of Jericho. All his soldiers were separated from him and scattered, 9 and he was captured.

He was taken to the king of Babylon at Riblah in the land of Hamath, where he pronounced sentence on him. 10 There at Riblah the king of Babylon killed the sons of Zedekiah before his eyes; he also killed all the officials of Judah. 11 Then he put out Zedekiah's eyes, bound him with bronze shackles and took him to Babylon, where he put him in prison till the day of his death." (Jer. 52:1-11) After destroying and mantling the Temple, the commander of the troops took captives and started them on their long journey to Babylon. The strategy was simple: 1) remove the center of Jewish identity and worship- the Temple; 2) remove the leadership and the "upper class"- the artisans, business professionals, craftsmen, and religious/civic leaders and leave only the poor. This was very effective in achieving the submission that the Babylonans desired: *"The commander of the guard took as prisoners Seraiah the chief priest, Zephaniah the priest next in rank and the three doorkeepers. 25 Of those still in the city, he took the officer in charge of the fighting men, and seven royal advisers. He also took the secretary who was chief officer in charge of conscripting the people of the land, sixty of whom were found in the city. 26 Nebuzaradan the commander took them all and brought them to the king of Babylon at Riblah. 27 There at Riblah, in the land of Hamath, the king had them executed.*

So Judah went into captivity, away from her land. 28 This is the number of the people Nebuchadnezzar carried into exile:

in the seventh year, 3,023 Jews;
29 in Nebuchadnezzar's eighteenth year,
832 people from Jerusalem;
30 in his twenty-third year,
745 Jews taken into exile by Nebuzaradan the commander of the imperial guard.
There were 4,600 people in all." (Jer. 52:24-30)

In a gesture of kindness and conciliation (and perhaps to seem more magnanimous to the captive Jews), the Babylonians released Jehoiachin from prison and provided for him the rest of his life: *"31 In the thirty-seventh year of the exile of Jehoiachin king of Judah, in the year Awel-Marduk became king of Babylon, on the twenty-fifth day of the twelfth month, he released Jehoiachin king of Judah and freed him from prison. 32 He spoke kindly to him and gave him a seat of honor higher than those of the other kings who were with him in Babylon. 33 So Jehoiachin put aside his prison clothes and for the rest of his life ate regularly at the king's table. 34 Day by day the king of Babylon gave Jehoiachin a regular allowance as long as he lived, till the day of his death."* (Jer 52:31-34)

Jeremiah, as depicted by Michelangelo from the Sistine Chapel ceiling

Hebrews 6

The writer of Hebrews again pleads for believers to move beyond the elementary teachings (the "milk" we have seen earlier) to maturity (the "meat"). This is a passage that is rewarded by God, as we attain maturity and our experience with Him becomes richer and more joy filled and rewarding: *"Therefore let us move beyond the elementary teachings about Christ and be taken forward to maturity, not laying again the foundation of repentance from acts that lead to death,[a] and*

of faith in God, 2 instruction about cleansing rites, the laying on of hands, the resurrection of the dead, and eternal judgment. 3 And God permitting, we will do so." (Heb. 6:1-3)

Thehe writer of this general letter lays out a premise that I personally find disturbing- he writes that once a believer has become invested in God, has given his life to the Lord and has received and tasted the gifts and blessing of the Spirit, he can then irretrievably fall away and cannot be brough once again to grace. My own experience is typical of many- small victories, periods of obedience and joy, and then struggling with and giving in to my sin nature- either in attitude or action. I sincerely hope that my "defeats" will not cause me to lose my salvation! I am of the opinion that the only "unforgivable" sin is the hard heart that refuses to answer the call of God, that refuses to listen or be moved into corrective action and repentance. My sincere hope is that my struggle is just that- a struggle- against my sin nature. The Scripture says: *"It is impossible for those who have once been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift, who have shared in the Holy Spirit, 5 who have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the coming age 6 and who have fallen away, to be brought back to repentance. To their loss they are crucifying the Son of God all over again and subjecting him to public disgrace. 7 Land that drinks in the rain often falling on it and that produces a crop useful to those for whom it is farmed receives the blessing of God. 8 But land that produces thorns and thistles is worthless and is in danger of being cursed. In the end it will be burned.*

9 Even though we speak like this, dear friends, we are convinced of better things in your case—the things that have to do with salvation. 10 God is not unjust; he will not forget your work and the love you have shown him as you have helped his people and continue to help them. 11 We want each of you to show this same diligence to the very end, so that what you hope for may be fully realized. 12 We do not want you to become lazy, but to imitate those who through faith and patience inherit what has been promised." (Heb. 6:4-12).

Then the writer of Hebrews explored the absolute reliability and certainty of God's promises. He is the covenant Maker- we are the ones who break the covenants! When God made a covenant with Abram, he swore "by Himself"- as the ultimate authority- that He would bless Israel on condition of their faithful obedience. In this somewhat strange scene in Genesis, we see animals cut in half. The ancient understanding of this was- "If I do not keep this covenant, may this (cutting in half) be done to me". Interestingly, Abram was "asleep" during this covenant ceremony- signifying that it was God alone who intitaited the covenant and dictated its terms, and God alone who guaranteed its provisions:"

This reference is very helpful here (https://www.multiplymovement.com/Material/251) *"When God promised to give this land to Abraham, Abraham asked, "How am I to know that I shall possess it?" God's answer to Abraham was to confirm His covenant by walking in between the separated halves of dead (sacrificed) animals (Gen. 15:9–17). Around the time of Abraham, covenant agreements often took this form, where the parties involved in a covenant would walk between animals that had been sacrificed. By doing this,*

each person was essentially saying, "If I break my word in this covenant, may I be cursed like this dead animal."

In the case of His covenant with Abraham, God caused Abraham to fall asleep, and then He came down in the image of a smoking firepot and flaming torch and walked through the separated halves of the sacrificed animals by Himself. This gives us a picture of God's commitment to His people. For one thing, it's incredible to think that God would come down and make an agreement with a mere man. But it's also amazing that God put Abraham to sleep while He walked through the animal pieces alone. He seems to have been showing that He was committed to keeping the covenant regardless of whether Abraham and His offspring were faithful to keep it or not. Theologians call this a unilateral covenant. God made this promise to bless Abraham and to use him to bless the world. This was God's decision, and He will uphold the covenant no matter what happens."

The Scripture says it this way*: "When God made his promise to Abraham, since there was no one greater for him to swear by, he swore by himself, 14 saying, "I will surely bless you and give you many descendants." 15 And so after waiting patiently, Abraham received what was promised. 16 People swear by someone greater than themselves, and the oath confirms what is said and puts an end to all argument. 17 Because God wanted to make the unchanging nature of his purpose very clear to the heirs of what was promised, he confirmed it with an oath. 18 God did this so that, by two unchangeable things in which it is impossible for God to lie, we who have fled to take hold of the hope set before us may be greatly encouraged. 19 We have this hope as an anchor for the soul, firm and secure. It enters the inner sanctuary behind the curtain, 20 where our forerunner, Jesus, has entered on our behalf. He has become a high priest forever, in the order of Melchizedek."* (Heb. 6:13-20) God's promises can indeed become the "anchor for the soul" (verse 19)!

Lamentations 1-2 November 10, 2014 Hebrews 7

The authorship of the book of Lamentations is traditionally ascribed to Jeremiah. This certainly makes both literary and historic sense, as Jeremiah was present with the exiles as they were taken and remained in Babylon. The "higher critics" sometimes dismiss this authorship, but in my view the simplest and most logical explanation is always the best (see http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Book_of_Lamentations).

There is little hope in this collection of poetic "mournings", the focus is on the present misery and hopelessness of the situation God's people find themselves in. Gos does not speak directly in this book. The structure of the book is a series of acrostic poems, based on 22 lines (each line representing a Hebrew letter) or multiples of 22 lines. The language and vocabulary as well as the literary style are very similar to the Book of Jeremiah, further indicating the traditional authorship of Jeremiah to be accurate.

The first chapter is a summary of the intense sadness and mourning felt by God's people as they lament their loss of homeland, freedom, and identity in this foreign land. Typical of this first *chapter are the last few lines:*

“People have heard my groaning,
but there is no one to comfort me.
All my enemies have heard of my distress;
they rejoice at what you have done.
May you bring the day you have announced
so they may become like me.
22 “Let all their wickedness come before you;
deal with them
as you have dealt with me
because of all my sins.
My groans are many
and my heart is faint.” (Lam. 1:21-22)

How difficult it must have been to “groan” and know that no one is there to hear, respond or acknowledge the misery expressed in “groaning”. Without the presence of God this is a certain reality- even in the presence of God we do not “feel” His presence with us. The wonderful truth is, though, that “feelings are not facts”. God is fully present whether or not we “feel” His presence!

Jeremiah then mourns the awful reality of receiving the judgment and anger of God. There can be no more horrendous state than to be “out of fellowship” with God, and in the midst of well- deserved consequences of one’s own sins! This is the tone of jeremiah’s omplaint and outcry to the God that he thinks has lost His love for the people:

“How the Lord has covered Daughter Zion
with the cloud of his anger[e]!
He has hurled down the splendor of Israel
from heaven to earth;
he has not remembered his footstool
in the day of his anger.
2 Without pity the Lord has swallowed up
all the dwellings of Jacob;
in his wrath he has torn down
the strongholds of Daughter Judah.
He has brought her kingdom and its princes
down to the ground in dishonor.
3 In fierce anger he has cut off
every horn
of Israel.
He has withdrawn his right hand
at the approach of the enemy.
He has burned in Jacob like a flaming fire
that consumes everything around it.
4 Like an enemy he has strung his bow;
his right hand is ready.
Like a foe he has slain
all who were pleasing to the eye;
he has poured out his wrath like fire
on the tent of Daughter Zion.” (Lam. 2:1-4)

The reality that Jeremiah and his people are experiencing is a truly awful one…the very righteous wrath and indignation of a God who has too often been ignored or

dismissed as irrelevant. Sometimes this punishment is a true “wake up call” for the people, and the first step towards repentance and restoration!

Jeremiah is truly the “weeping prophet” here, and he is besieged by the signs and sounds of the suffering of those around him:

“My eyes fail from weeping,
I am in torment within;
my heart is poured out on the ground
because my people are destroyed,
because children and infants faint
in the streets of the city.
12 They say to their mothers,
“Where is bread and wine?”
as they faint like the wounded
in the streets of the city,
as their lives ebb away
in their mothers’ arms.” (Jer. 2: 11-12)

There is almost unimaginable terror in the aftermath of God’s fury- the prophets are “killed” and the parents resort to cannibalism and eat their children (verse 20):

“Arise, cry out in the night,
as the watches of the night begin;
pour out your heart like water
in the presence of the Lord.
Lift up your hands to him
for the lives of your children,
who faint from hunger
at every street corner.
20 “Look, Lord, and consider:
Whom have you ever treated like this?
Should women eat their offspring,
the children they have cared for?
Should priest and prophet be killed
in the sanctuary of the Lord?
21 “Young and old lie together
in the dust of the streets;
my young men and young women
have fallen by the sword.
You have slain them in the day of your anger;
you have slaughtered them without pity.
22 “As you summon to a feast day,
so you summoned against me terrors on every side.
In the day of the Lord’s anger
no one escaped or survived;
those I cared for and reared
my enemy has destroyed.” (Lam. 2: 11-22)

Hebrews 7

The author of Hebrews goes even further in the development of Christology related to Melchizadek. In what (to me at least) seems like a fanciful statement, the author of Hebrews suggests that Levi (and his descendant Levites) were already contained in the body of their ancestor Abram. The author further describes Melchizadek and makes a point that he accepted tithes (and by inference, worship). This is strong support for Melchizadek being interpreted as either a "type" of Christ or a preincarnate appearance of Christ. The author tells us: *"This Melchizedek was king of Salem and priest of God Most High. He met Abraham returning from the defeat of the kings and blessed him, 2 and Abraham gave him a tenth of everything. First, the name Melchizedek means "king of righteousness"; then also, "king of Salem" means "king of peace." 3 Without father or mother, without genealogy, without beginning of days or end of life, resembling the Son of God, he remains a priest forever.*

4 Just think how great he was: Even the patriarch Abraham gave him a tenth of the plunder! 5 Now the law requires the descendants of Levi who become priests to collect a tenth from the people—that is, from their fellow Israelites—even though they also are descended from Abraham. 6 This man, however, did not trace his descent from Levi, yet he collected a tenth from Abraham and blessed him who had the promises. 7 And without doubt the lesser is blessed by the greater. 8 In the one case, the tenth is collected by people who die; but in the other case, by him who is declared to be living. 9 One might even say that Levi, who collects the tenth, paid the tenth through Abraham, 10 because when Melchizedek met Abraham, Levi was still in the body of his ancestor." (Heb. 7:1-10).

The author of Hebrews then makes an important point- the Law did not bring perfection and "aceeptability" to the believer. If the Law had been totally sufficient for salvation, then Jesus would not made His ultimate sacrifice for all of us. So Jesus is both by logic and theology "superior" to all in the priesthoos, and indeed all who practiced the Law: *"If perfection could have been attained through the Levitical priesthood—and indeed the law given to the people established that priesthood—why was there still need for another priest to come, one in the order of Melchizedek, not in the order of Aaron? 12 For when the priesthood is changed, the law must be changed also. 13 He of whom these things are said belonged to a different tribe, and no one from that tribe has ever served at the altar. 14 For it is clear that our Lord descended from Judah, and in regard to that tribe Moses said nothing about priests. 15 And what we have said is even more clear if another priest like Melchizedek appears, 16 one who has become a priest not on the basis of a regulation as to his ancestry but on the basis of the power of an indestructible life. 17 For it is declared:*
"You are a priest forever,
in the order of Melchizedek."
18 The former regulation is set aside because it was weak and useless 19 (for the law made nothing perfect), and a better hope is introduced, by which we draw near to God." (Heb. 7:11-18)

Through God's oath (which he swore to Himself), Jesus was made a superior priest- the High Priest to all- and therefore could accomplish atonement and give God's own forgiveness to us as a gift. He was not in the office of an ordinary priest, but was superior both in form and function: *"And it was not without an oath! Others*

became priests without any oath, 21 but he became a priest with an oath when God said to him:
“The Lord has sworn
and will not change his mind:
‘You are a priest forever.’”
22 Because of this oath, Jesus has become the guarantor of a better covenant.
23 Now there have been many of those priests, since death prevented them from continuing in office; 24 but because Jesus lives forever, he has a permanent priesthood. 25 Therefore he is able to save completely those who come to God through him, because he always lives to intercede for them.
26 Such a high priest truly meets our need—one who is holy, blameless, pure, set apart from sinners, exalted above the heavens. 27 Unlike the other high priests, he does not need to offer sacrifices day after day, first for his own sins, and then for the sins of the people. He sacrificed for their sins once for all when he offered himself. 28 For the law appoints as high priests men in all their weakness; but the oath, which came after the law, appointed the Son, who has been made perfect forever.” (Heb. 7:20-28). Jesus has become the only One who truly “meets our need” (verse 26). Praise to His holy and wonderful Name!!

Lamentations 3-5 November 11, 2014 Hebrews 8

IN poetic language similar to that found in Job, Jeremiah complains that the Lord has afflicted him in both body and spirit. Hiow can a mere person resist the might and power of the Creator?:
“I am the man who has seen affliction
by the rod of the Lord’s wrath.
2 He has driven me away and made me walk
in darkness rather than light;
3 indeed, he has turned his hand against me
again and again, all day long.
4 He has made my skin and my flesh grow old
and has broken my bones.
5 He has besieged me and surrounded me
with bitterness and hardship.
6 He has made me dwell in darkness
like those long dead.
7 He has walled me in so I cannot escape;
he has weighed me down with chains.
8 Even when I call out or cry for help,
he shuts out my prayer.
9 He has barred my way with blocks of stone;
he has made my paths crooked.
10 Like a bear lying in wait,
like a lion in hiding,
11 he dragged me from the path and mangled me
and left me without help.” (Lam 3:1-11)

Yet in the midst of suffering, torment and pain there is hopr- real hope- because of the mercy and compasiion of the Lord:
“I remember my affliction and my wandering,

the bitterness and the gall.
20 I well remember them,
and my soul is downcast within me.
21 Yet this I call to mind
and therefore I have hope:
22 Because of the Lord's great love we are not consumed,
for his compassions never fail.
23 They are new every morning;
great is your faithfulness.
24 I say to myself, "The Lord is my portion;
therefore I will wait for him."
25 The Lord is good to those whose hope is in him,
to the one who seeks him;
26 it is good to wait quietly
for the salvation of the Lord.
27 It is good for a man to bear the yoke
while he is young." (Lam. 3: 19-27)
Bacause of the Lord's great love we are not consumed (verse 22)- God could have destroyed the people completely- but His goal was not destruction but recalamation- he desired to reclaim His people and ultimately reunite with them in true fellowship.

It is not God's nature to "cast us off forever" even if we richly deserve it:
"For no one is cast off
by the Lord forever.
32 Though he brings grief, he will show compassion,
so great is his unfailing love.
33 For he does not willingly bring affliction
or grief to anyone." (Lam 3:31-33)

We who have sinned and angered God must first examine ourselves and confess and own our shortcomings and misdeeds- this is the way that leads to restoration and forgiveness:
"Let us examine our ways and test them,
and let us return to the Lord.
41 Let us lift up our hearts and our hands
to God in heaven, and say:
42 "We have sinned and rebelled
and you have not forgiven." (Lam. 3:40-42)

Jeremiah again reminds God how the people have plotted against him and sought his destruction, but that he was always faithful to proclaim God's Word:
"I called on your name, Lord,
from the depths of the pit.
56 You heard my plea: "Do not close your ears
to my cry for relief."
57 You came near when I called you,
and you said, "Do not fear."
58 You, Lord, took up my case;
you redeemed my life.

59 Lord, you have seen the wrong done to me.
Uphold my cause!
60 You have seen the depth of their vengeance,
all their plots against me.
61 Lord, you have heard their insults,
all their plots against me—
62 what my enemies whisper and mutter
against me all day long.
63 Look at them! Sitting or standing,
they mock me in their songs.
64 Pay them back what they deserve, Lord,
for what their hands have done.
65 Put a veil over their hearts,
and may your curse be on them!
66 Pursue them in anger and destroy them
from under the heavens of the Lord." (Lam. 3:55-66)

Jeremiah reminds the people of how far they have fallen, how destitute they are materially and spirituall, compared to the lives that they so recently lived and enjoyed:

"How the gold has lost its luster,
the fine gold become dull!
The sacred gems are scattered
at every street corner.
2 How the precious children of Zion,
once worth their weight in gold,
are now considered as pots of clay,
the work of a potter's hands!
3 Even jackals offer their breasts
to nurse their young,
but my people have become heartless
like ostriches in the desert.
4 Because of thirst the infant's tongue
sticks to the roof of its mouth;
the children beg for bread,
but no one gives it to them.
5 Those who once ate delicacies
are destitute in the streets.
Those brought up in royal purple
now lie on ash heaps.
6 The punishment of my people
is greater than that of Sodom,
which was overthrown in a moment
without a hand turned to help her." (Lam. 4:1-6)

Those who die quickly (by the "sword") are better off than those who die a slow death of starvation and despair. All of this is diretly due to the sin of the people, their stubbornness and the "sins of her prophets" (verse 13):

"Those killed by the sword are better off
than those who die of famine;

racked with hunger, they waste away
for lack of food from the field.
10 With their own hands compassionate women
have cooked their own children,
who became their food
when my people were destroyed.
11 The Lord has given full vent to his wrath;
he has poured out his fierce anger.
He kindled a fire in Zion
that consumed her foundations.
12 The kings of the earth did not believe,
nor did any of the peoples of the world,
that enemies and foes could enter
the gates of Jerusalem.
13 But it happened because of the sins of her prophets
and the iniquities of her priests,
who shed within her
the blood of the righteous." (Lam 4:9-13)

And Edom will also be punished:
"Rejoice and be glad, Daughter Edom,
you who live in the land of Uz.
But to you also the cup will be passed;
you will be drunk and stripped naked.
22 Your punishment will end, Daughter Zion;
he will not prolong your exile.
But he will punish your sin, Daughter Edom,
and expose your wickedness." (Lam 4:21-22)

Jeremiah then pleads with God to "remember" the terrible plight they are now in because of their sin- surely he will have mercy on them and restore them:
"Remember, Lord, what has happened to us;
look, and see our disgrace.
2 Our inheritance has been turned over to strangers,
our homes to foreigners.
3 We have become fatherless,
our mothers are widows.
4 We must buy the water we drink;
our wood can be had only at a price.
5 Those who pursue us are at our heels;
we are weary and find no rest.
6 We submitted to Egypt and Assyria
to get enough bread.
7 Our ancestors sinned and are no more,
and we bear their punishment.
8 Slaves rule over us,
and there is no one to free us from their hands.
9 We get our bread at the risk of our lives
because of the sword in the desert.
10 Our skin is hot as an oven,

feverish from hunger." (Lam. 5:1-10)

This acrostic poem- and the Book of Lamentations- ends with a reminder that God reigns supreme- he is over all that is created and all the nations:
"You, Lord, reign forever;
your throne endures from generation to generation.
20 Why do you always forget us?
Why do you forsake us so long?
21 Restore us to yourself, Lord, that we may return;
renew our days as of old
22 unless you have utterly rejected us
and are angry with us beyond measure." (Lam. 5:19-22)
The last words are a tribute to hope- hope for restoration and renewal. God heard the cries of His people, and later did indeed restore them. This was the rhythm of the Old Testament- the people prosper, then they forget God and go their own way. God then brings calamity and punishment on them- they "awaken" long enough to return and repent, and then the cycle starts over. How God must have longed for a truly lasting relationship with His people!

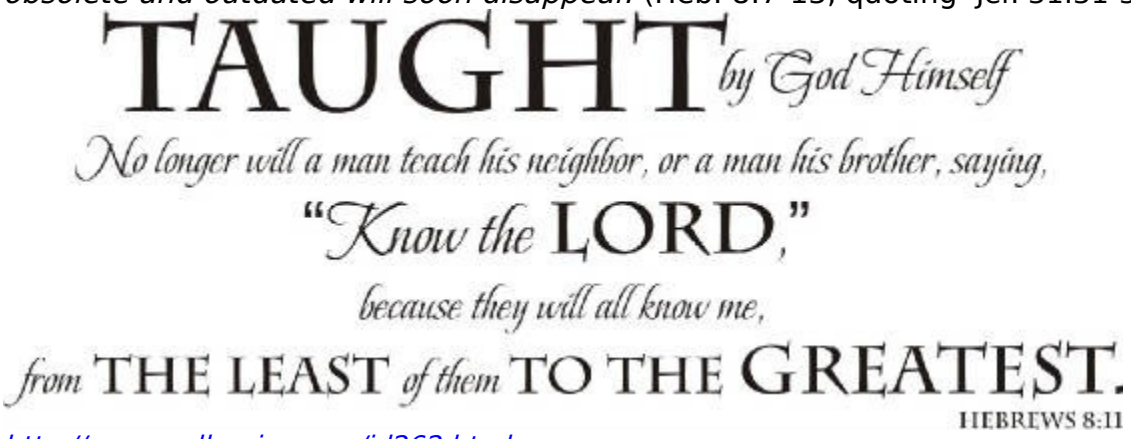
Hebrews 8

The argument/explanation for the high priesthood of Jesus continues in Hebrews 8. The author explains that Jesus is indeed our high priest, and that He offers a superior covenant to the old one, namely salvation for the people and true forgiveness of sin. This argument would resonante with the Jews, whose sacrificial system and the theology related to it were ingrained: *"Now the main point of what we are saying is this: We do have such a high priest, who sat down at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in heaven, 2 and who serves in the sanctuary, the true tabernacle set up by the Lord, not by a mere human being.*

3 Every high priest is appointed to offer both gifts and sacrifices, and so it was necessary for this one also to have something to offer. 4 If he were on earth, he would not be a priest, for there are already priests who offer the gifts prescribed by the law. 5 They serve at a sanctuary that is a copy and shadow of what is in heaven. This is why Moses was warned when he was about to build the tabernacle: "See to it that you make everything according to the pattern shown you on the mountain." 6 But in fact the ministry Jesus has received is as superior to theirs as the covenant of which he is mediator is superior to the old one, since the new covenant is established on better promises." (Heb. 8:1-6).

The author of Hebrews then quotes Jeremiah 31, and repeats the promise made at that point in history by God and points to its ultimate fulfiulment in Jesus. The Law will indeed be written in the hearts of men, and they will truly know God. The inward being is becoming transformed- not just the outward actions of "obedience". Only the "broken and contrite heart" is pleasing to God: *"You do not delight in sacrifice, or I would bring it;*
you do not take pleasure in burnt offerings.
My sacrifice, O God, is a broken spirit;
a broken and contrite heart
you, God, will not despise." (Psalm 51:16-17).

The writer explains: *“For if there had been nothing wrong with that first covenant, no place would have been sought for another. 8 But God found fault with the people and said[b]:*
“The days are coming, declares the Lord,
when I will make a new covenant
with the people of Israel
and with the people of Judah.
9 It will not be like the covenant
I made with their ancestors
when I took them by the hand
to lead them out of Egypt,
because they did not remain faithful to my covenant,
and I turned away from them,
declares the Lord.
10 This is the covenant I will establish with the people of Israel
after that time, declares the Lord.
I will put my laws in their minds
and write them on their hearts.
I will be their God,
and they will be my people.
11 No longer will they teach their neighbor,
or say to one another, ‘Know the Lord,’
because they will all know me,
from the least of them to the greatest.
12 For I will forgive their wickedness
and will remember their sins no more.”[c]
13 By calling this covenant “new,” he has made the first one obsolete; and what is obsolete and outdated will soon disappear. (Heb. 8:7-13, quoting Jer. 31:31-34)



http://www.wallpraise.com/id262.html

Ezekiel 1-3 November 12, 2014 Hebrews 9

Those who look at the Bible as only an “interesting book” or a “collection of old stories” sometimes spend a significant amount of time examining Ezekiel. The “UFO” theorists, who believe that mankind has been visited several times by aliens, often look at the accounts in Ezekiel in great detail and with much interest. They

sometimes also examine carefully the stories in Genesis and elsewhere about the "Nephilim" (Gen. 6:1-7), who have been speculated to be fallen angels, giants, and even the physical counterparts of what the Greeks later called the "gods". (http://www.nwcreation.net/nephilim.html). Certainly the vision that Ezekiel saw "by the Kebar River" was profound, fascinating, vivid and probably disturbing: *"I looked, and I saw a windstorm coming out of the north—an immense cloud with flashing lightning and surrounded by brilliant light. The center of the fire looked like glowing metal, 5 and in the fire was what looked like four living creatures. In appearance their form was human, 6 but each of them had four faces and four wings. 7 Their legs were straight; their feet were like those of a calf and gleamed like burnished bronze. 8 Under their wings on their four sides they had human hands. All four of them had faces and wings, 9 and the wings of one touched the wings of another. Each one went straight ahead; they did not turn as they moved.*

10 Their faces looked like this: Each of the four had the face of a human being, and on the right side each had the face of a lion, and on the left the face of an ox; each also had the face of an eagle. 11 Such were their faces. They each had two wings spreading out upward, each wing touching that of the creature on either side; and each had two other wings covering its body. 12 Each one went straight ahead. Wherever the spirit would go, they would go, without turning as they went. 13 The appearance of the living creatures was like burning coals of fire or like torches. Fire moved back and forth among the creatures; it was bright, and lightning flashed out of it. 14 The creatures sped back and forth like flashes of lightning." (Ezek. 1:4-14)

There is not only sight but sound, and the prophet describes the vision as being like the very glory of God Himself: *"Spread out above the heads of the living creatures was what looked something like a vault, sparkling like crystal, and awesome. 23 Under the vault their wings were stretched out one toward the other, and each had two wings covering its body. 24 When the creatures moved, I heard the sound of their wings, like the roar of rushing waters, like the voice of the Almighty,[b] like the tumult of an army. When they stood still, they lowered their wings.*

25 Then there came a voice from above the vault over their heads as they stood with lowered wings. 26 Above the vault over their heads was what looked like a throne of lapis lazuli, and high above on the throne was a figure like that of a man. 27 I saw that from what appeared to be his waist up he looked like glowing metal, as if full of fire, and that from there down he looked like fire; and brilliant light surrounded him. 28 Like the appearance of a rainbow in the clouds on a rainy day, so was the radiance around him.

This was the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the Lord. When I saw it, I fell facedown, and I heard the voice of one speaking." (Ezek. 1:22-28)

Ezekiel instinctively realizes that this is an appearance of God- a "theophany"- and he is awed and falls facedown as a symbol and sign of his submission to to voice and call of God.

God speaks through this vision, and commissions Ezekiel to be His prophet, His spokesperson to the people. God calls Ezekiel here in dramatic fashion, somewhat like the call of Moses through a burning bush or the wrestling match with

Jacob/Israel. His message is so important it is written on a scroll- front and back- and the words there are full of woe: *“He said to me, “Son of man, stand up on your feet and I will speak to you.” 2 As he spoke, the Spirit came into me and raised me to my feet, and I heard him speaking to me.*

3 He said: “Son of man, I am sending you to the Israelites, to a rebellious nation that has rebelled against me; they and their ancestors have been in revolt against me to this very day. 4 The people to whom I am sending you are obstinate and stubborn. Say to them, ‘This is what the Sovereign Lord says.’ 5 And whether they listen or fail to listen—for they are a rebellious people—they will know that a prophet has been among them. 6 And you, son of man, do not be afraid of them or their words. Do not be afraid, though briers and thorns are all around you and you live among scorpions. Do not be afraid of what they say or be terrified by them, though they are a rebellious people. 7 You must speak my words to them, whether they listen or fail to listen, for they are rebellious. 8 But you, son of man, listen to what I say to you. Do not rebel like that rebellious people; open your mouth and eat what I give you.”

9 Then I looked, and I saw a hand stretched out to me. In it was a scroll, 10 which he unrolled before me. On both sides of it were written words of lament and mourning and woe.” (Ezek. 2:1-10)

God then instructs Ezekiel to do something unusual- to “eat” the scroll. The taste, as God tells Ezekiel, will be as “sweet as honey”. The symbolism here is unmistakable- by “eating” the words of Gid the prophet is internalizing them- they will be a literal part of his body and will be carried with him wherever he goes. And God’s presence, by inference, will also go with him in times of trial and trouble. Ezekile is obedient and foillows God’s instructions exactly: *“ And he said to me, “Son of man, eat what is before you, eat this scroll; then go and speak to the people of Israel.” 2 So I opened my mouth, and he gave me the scroll to eat.*

3 Then he said to me, “Son of man, eat this scroll I am giving you and fill your stomach with it.” So I ate it, and it tasted as sweet as honey in my mouth.

4 He then said to me: “Son of man, go now to the people of Israel and speak my words to them. 5 You are not being sent to a people of obscure speech and strange language, but to the people of Israel— 6 not to many peoples of obscure speech and strange language, whose words you cannot understand. Surely if I had sent you to them, they would have listened to you. 7 But the people of Israel are not willing to listen to you because they are not willing to listen to me, for all the Israelites are hardened and obstinate. 8 But I will make you as unyielding and hardened as they are. 9 I will make your forehead like the hardest stone, harder than flint. Do not be afraid of them or terrified by them, though they are a rebellious people.”

10 And he said to me, “Son of man, listen carefully and take to heart all the words I speak to you. 11 Go now to your people in exile and speak to them. Say to them, ‘This is what the Sovereign Lord says,’ whether they listen or fail to listen.” (Ezek. 3:1-11). God knows the hardship Ezkile will endure in being faithful to His calling, and promises to strengthen him and deliver him from the anger of those hearing the Word (verses 8-9).

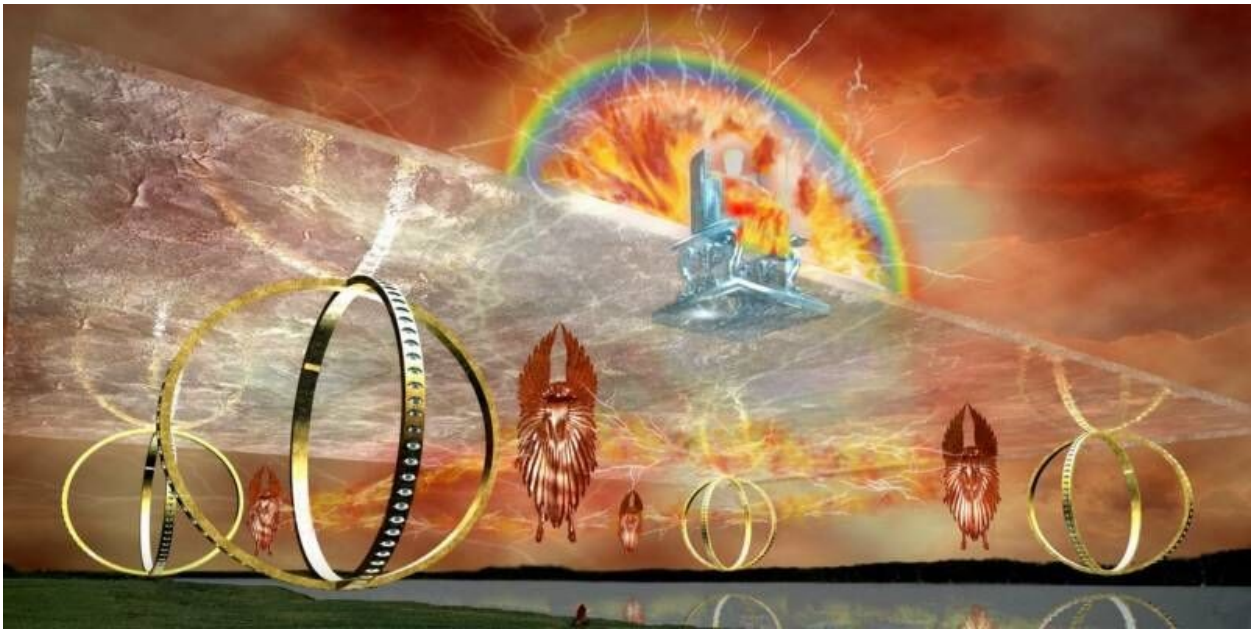
After this drmmatic sequence of events, Ezekiel is carried by the Spirit back to the exiles, and he sits for “seven days”, overcome and distressed. He is likely trying to process this dramatic intrusion and calling on his life. The Scriptures describe it this way: *“Then the Spirit lifted me up, and I heard behind me a loud rumbling sound as the glory of the Lord rose from the place where it was standing. 13 It was the sound of the wings of the living creatures brushing against each other and the sound of the wheels beside them, a loud rumbling sound. 14 The Spirit then lifted me up and took me away, and I went in bitterness and in the anger of my spirit, with the strong hand of the Lord on me. 15 I came to the exiles who lived at Tel Aviv near the Kebar River. And there, where they were living, I sat among them for seven days—deeply distressed.”* (Ezek. 3:12-15)

A major part of Ezekiel’s commission as prophet include his role as “watchman”. Ezekiel is to carefully observe the people- if one sins they are to be warned; if a righteous person then turns to sin they are also to be warned- otherwise Ezekiel will be accountable for their “blood” (verses 18 and 20): *“At the end of seven days the word of the Lord came to me: 17 “Son of man, I have made you a watchman for the people of Israel; so hear the word I speak and give them warning from me. 18 When I say to a wicked person, ‘You will surely die,’ and you do not warn them or speak out to dissuade them from their evil ways in order to save their life, that wicked person will die for[b] their sin, and I will hold you accountable for their blood. 19 But if you do warn the wicked person and they do not turn from their wickedness or from their evil ways, they will die for their sin; but you will have saved yourself.*

20 “Again, when a righteous person turns from their righteousness and does evil, and I put a stumbling block before them, they will die. Since you did not warn them, they will die for their sin. The righteous things that person did will not be remembered, and I will hold you accountable for their blood. 21 But if you do warn the righteous person not to sin and they do not sin, they will surely live because they took warning, and you will have saved yourself.”

22 The hand of the Lord was on me there, and he said to me, “Get up and go out to the plain, and there I will speak to you.” 23 So I got up and went out to the plain. And the glory of the Lord was standing there, like the glory I had seen by the Kebar River, and I fell facedown.” (Ezek. 3: 16-23).

One again, in circumstance similar to those at the kebar River, God speaks directly to Ezekiel, telling him that he -Ezekiel- is to be the voice of God, faithfully proclaiming what God has told him to say. He is to speak the truth from God, despite the fact that he is speaking to “rebellious people” who will reject both Ezekiel (by tying him up) and his message: *“Then the Spirit came into me and raised me to my feet. He spoke to me and said: “Go, shut yourself inside your house. 25 And you, son of man, they will tie with ropes; you will be bound so that you cannot go out among the people. 26 I will make your tongue stick to the roof of your mouth so that you will be silent and unable to rebuke them, for they are a rebellious people. 27 But when I speak to you, I will open your mouth and you shall say to them, ‘This is what the Sovereign Lord says.’ Whoever will listen let them listen, and whoever will refuse let them refuse; for they are a rebellious people.”* (Ezek. 3:24-27)



http://showmeyourglory.today/ezekiel-1-and-psalm-37/

Hebrews 9

The writer of Hebrews briefly reviews the practices of sacrificial worship in the "earthly sanctuary" (verse 1), focusing on the yearly visit of the high priest to the Holy of Holies wher the Law was kept. The sacrifices of blood are described here as "not able to clear the conscience of the worshiper." (verse 9). This is presented in contrast to the description that follows this one, which is a description of the work of Christ in His sacrifice. The eartly tabernacle and the sacrifice are described this way: *"Now the first covenant had regulations for worship and also an earthly sanctuary. 2 A tabernacle was set up. In its first room were the lampstand and the table with its consecrated bread; this was called the Holy Place. 3 Behind the second curtain was a room called the Most Holy Place, 4 which had the golden altar of incense and the gold-covered ark of the covenant. This ark contained the gold jar of manna, Aaron's staff that had budded, and the stone tablets of the covenant. 5 Above the ark were the cherubim of the Glory, overshadowing the atonement cover. But we cannot discuss these things in detail now.*

6 When everything had been arranged like this, the priests entered regularly into the outer room to carry on their ministry. 7 But only the high priest entered the inner room, and that only once a year, and never without blood, which he offered for himself and for the sins the people had committed in ignorance. 8 The Holy Spirit was showing by this that the way into the Most Holy Place had not yet been disclosed as long as the first tabernacle was still functioning. 9 This is an illustration for the present time, indicating that the gifts and sacrifices being offered were not able to clear the conscience of the worshiper. 10 They are only a matter of food and drink and various ceremonial washings—external regulations applying until the time of the new order." (Heb. 9:1-10). The blood offerings were not sufficient for salvation- they did not accomplish the forgiveness of sin!

Then the author describes the reality that was ushered in by the Great Sacrifice- that of the Lord Jesus Himself. *"But when Christ came as high priest of the good things that are now already here,[a] he went through the greater and more perfect tabernacle that is not made with human hands, that is to say, is not a part of this creation. 12 He did not enter by means of the blood of goats and calves; but he entered the Most Holy Place once for all by his own blood, thus obtaining[b] eternal redemption. 13 The blood of goats and bulls and the ashes of a heifer sprinkled on those who are ceremonially unclean sanctify them so that they are outwardly clean. 14 How much more, then, will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself unblemished to God, cleanse our consciences from acts that lead to death,[c] so that we may serve the living God!"* (Heb. 9:11-14). The power of the blood of Christ cleans the inward person, and "cleanses our consciences from acts that lead todeath"- that is, sins!

The author then describes in some detail the shedding of animal blood that accompanied the establishment and keeping of the first covenant. The principle there is *"In fact, the law requires that nearly everything be cleansed with blood, and without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness."* (Heb. 9:22). To be complete in our examination of this principle, there is good Biblical evidence that other (non-blood) sacrifices were also acceptable to God (see http://www.uhcg.org/Hol/blood-not-req.html and http://www.equip.org/articles/is-the-shedding-of-blood-necessary-for-forgiveness/#christian-books-1 and especially http://www.whatjewsbelieve.org/explanation2.html).

Several important doctrines are presented in the last part of this chapetr of Hebrews: 1) the existence and nature of "copies" of heavenly things; 2) the purpose of Christ's first and second comings. The first dioctrine (teaching) has to do with the things of earth- specifically those objects of our worship in the "earthly temple". The author of Hebrews explains: *"It was necessary, then, for the copies of the heavenly things to be purified with these sacrifices, but the heavenly things themselves with better sacrifices than these. 24 For Christ did not enter a sanctuary made with human hands that was only a copy of the true one; he entered heaven itself, now to appear for us in God's presence. 25 Nor did he enter heaven to offer himself again and again, the way the high priest enters the Most Holy Place every year with blood that is not his own. 26 Otherwise Christ would have had to suffer many times since the creation of the world. But he has appeared once for all at the culmination of the ages to do away with sin by the sacrifice of himself. 27 Just as people are destined to die once, and after that to face judgment, 28 so Christ was sacrificed once to take away the sins of many; and he will appear a second time, not to bear sin, but to bring salvation to those who are waiting for him."* (Heb. 9:23-28) So first, Jesus did not enter an earthly temple that was "made by hands" (which is a copy) but entered Heaven itself- the "true" sanctuary! Jesus mission was "to do away with sin by the sacrifice of himself" (verse 26), and to return a second time "not to bear sin" but to bring salvation to those who are waiting for Him! May we all wait patiently…come Lord Jesus! (Rev. 22:20).

Ezekiel 4-6 November 13, 2014 Hebrews 10:1-23

Making a clay "model" of the city, building "toy" siege ramps, lying on one's side and eating food cooked over cow manure, cutting the beard and scalp hair and

burning or disposing of it in thirds- these are the directions God gave Ezekiel. Surely he wondered if this “acting out” would effectively reach the people. He was given explanations for each action- lying on the side for 390 or 40 days was symbolic of the number of years that Israel and Judah had been sinning against the Lord. The food prepared over dung was symbolic of the defiled food God’s people had been consuming. The hair was symbolic of the people and their rebellion and the punishment God had reserved for them

Did Ezekiel truly believe that this “acting out” was the best way to wake this rebellious people? Whether this was his conclusion or not, they key thing to see here is that he was obnedient to God. The Father sometimes makes demands and requests that we think are “unreasonable” or foolish- yet they are part of His plan and His way, and our best response always is obedience!

As to the siege ramps and clay “city” God explained: *“Now, son of man, take a block of clay, put it in front of you and draw the city of Jerusalem on it. 2 Then lay siege to it: Erect siege works against it, build a ramp up to it, set up camps against it and put battering rams around it. 3 Then take an iron pan, place it as an iron wall between you and the city and turn your face toward it. It will be under siege, and you shall besiege it. This will be a sign to the people of Israel.”* (Ezek. 4:1-3)

Then God described how Ezekiel was to lieg on his side: *“Then lie on your left side and put the sin of the people of Israel upon yourself.[a] You are to bear their sin for the number of days you lie on your side. 5 I have assigned you the same number of days as the years of their sin. So for 390 days you will bear the sin of the people of Israel.*

6 “After you have finished this, lie down again, this time on your right side, and bear the sin of the people of Judah. I have assigned you 40 days, a day for each year. 7 Turn your face toward the siege of Jerusalem and with bared arm prophesy against her. 8 I will tie you up with ropes so that you cannot turn from one side to the other until you have finished the days of your siege.

9 “Take wheat and barley, beans and lentils, millet and spelt; put them in a storage jar and use them to make bread for yourself. You are to eat it during the 390 days you lie on your side. 10 Weigh out twenty shekels[b] of food to eat each day and eat it at set times. 11 Also measure out a sixth of a hin[c] of water and drink it at set times. 12 Eat the food as you would a loaf of barley bread; bake it in the sight of the people, using human excrement for fuel.” 13 The Lord said, “In this way the people of Israel will eat defiled food among the nations where I will drive them.”(Ezek. 4:4-13)

God then showed Ezekiel the symboilism of the shaved hair and its disposal: *“Now, son of man, take a sharp sword and use it as a barber’s razor to shave your head and your beard. Then take a set of scales and divide up the hair. 2 When the days of your siege come to an end, burn a third of the hair inside the city. Take a third and strike it with the sword all around the city. And scatter a third to the wind. For I will pursue them with drawn sword. 3 But take a few hairs and tuck them away in the folds of your garment. 4 Again, take a few of these and throw them into the fire and burn them up. A fire will spread from there to all Israel.*

5 “This is what the Sovereign Lord says: This is Jerusalem, which I have set in the center of the nations, with countries all around her. 6 Yet in her wickedness she has rebelled against my laws and decrees more than the nations and countries around her. She has rejected my laws and has not followed my decrees.

7 “Therefore this is what the Sovereign Lord says: You have been more unruly than the nations around you and have not followed my decrees or kept my laws. You have not even[e] conformed to the standards of the nations around you.

8 “Therefore this is what the Sovereign Lord says: I myself am against you, Jerusalem, and I will inflict punishment on you in the sight of the nations. 9 Because of all your detestable idols, I will do to you what I have never done before and will never do again. 10 Therefore in your midst parents will eat their children, and children will eat their parents. I will inflict punishment on you and will scatter all your survivors to the winds. 11 Therefore as surely as I live, declares the Sovereign Lord, because you have defiled my sanctuary with all your vile images and detestable practices, I myself will shave you; I will not look on you with pity or spare you. 12 A third of your people will die of the plague or perish by famine inside you; a third will fall by the sword outside your walls; and a third I will scatter to the winds and pursue with drawn sword.” (Ezek. 5:1-12)

There is hope, and an end to the punishment and judgment. When God’s wrath and need for justice and righteousness have been satisfied, He promises to relent: *“Then my anger will cease and my wrath against them will subside, and I will be avenged. And when I have spent my wrath on them, they will know that I the Lord have spoken in my zeal.”* (Ezek. 5:13).

Ezekiel is then commanded to “set his face” against the mountains of Israel, just as God will set His face against the people and inflict punishment on them: *“The word of the Lord came to me: 2 “Son of man, set your face against the mountains of Israel; prophesy against them 3 and say: ‘You mountains of Israel, hear the word of the Sovereign Lord. This is what the Sovereign Lord says to the mountains and hills, to the ravines and valleys: I am about to bring a sword against you, and I will destroy your high places. 4 Your altars will be demolished and your incense altars will be smashed; and I will slay your people in front of your idols. 5 I will lay the dead bodies of the Israelites in front of their idols, and I will scatter your bones around your altars. 6 Wherever you live, the towns will be laid waste and the high places demolished, so that your altars will be laid waste and devastated, your idols smashed and ruined, your incense altars broken down, and what you have made wiped out. 7 Your people will fall slain among you, and you will know that I am the Lord.”* (Ezek. 6:1-7)
In God’s mercy the destruction will not be complete- He will gracipusly spare some of the people- and leave at least the possibility of fulfilment of the coveneat He made with them: *“‘But I will spare some, for some of you will escape the sword when you are scattered among the lands and nations. 9 Then in the nations where they have been carried captive, those who escape will remember me—how I have been grieved by their adulterous hearts, which have turned away from me, and by their eyes, which have lusted after their idols. They will loathe themselves for the evil they have done and for all their detestable practices. 10 And they will know that*

I am the Lord; I did not threaten in vain to bring this calamity on them." (Ezek. 6:8-10). The God we serve and love is not arbitrary, unfair or unreasonable- He desires the best for His children. Sometimes this involves correction that is severe and includes great suffering, but He is in control and knows what is best for His children- and for each of us as well. The object of His correction is to teach us that He is the Lord, and to reclaim us as His children. None os us enjoys discipline, but we know that those God loves He disciplines (Prov. 3:12; Heb. 12:6; Rev. 3:19)

Hebrews 10:1-23

Chapter 10 of Hebrews completes the Christology of the "high priesthood" of Christ and the sacrificial system that he supplanted. The Law, after all, did not accomplish righteousness simply because of the sin nature of manking. It is impossible to "keep the Law perfectly", so God in His mercy offers us the sacrifice of Christ "once and for all" (verse 10). This is what the writer of Hebrews says: *"The law is only a shadow of the good things that are coming—not the realities themselves. For this reason it can never, by the same sacrifices repeated endlessly year after year, make perfect those who draw near to worship. 2 Otherwise, would they not have stopped being offered? For the worshipers would have been cleansed once for all, and would no longer have felt guilty for their sins. 3 But those sacrifices are an annual reminder of sins. 4 It is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins.*

5 Therefore, when Christ came into the world, he said:

"Sacrifice and offering you did not desire,
but a body you prepared for me;
6 with burnt offerings and sin offerings
you were not pleased.
7 Then I said, 'Here I am—it is written about me in the scroll—
I have come to do your will, my God.'"[a]
8 First he said, "Sacrifices and offerings, burnt offerings and sin offerings you did not desire, nor were you pleased with them"—though they were offered in accordance with the law. 9 Then he said, "Here I am, I have come to do your will." He sets aside the first to establish the second. 10 And by that will, we have been made holy through the sacrifice of the body of Jesus Christ once for all." (Heb. 10:1-10) God literally "set aside" the first covenant to establish the second (Verse 9)

Another great principle is offered in the next few verses of Hebrews- that which is forgiven does not require sacrifice. The author of Hebrews explains this: *"Day after day every priest stands and performs his religious duties; again and again he offers the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins. 12 But when this priest had offered for all time one sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God, 13 and since that time he waits for his enemies to be made his footstool. 14 For by one sacrifice he has made perfect forever those who are being made holy.*

15 The Holy Spirit also testifies to us about this. First he says:

16 "This is the covenant I will make with them
after that time, says the Lord.

I will put my laws in their hearts,
and I will write them on their minds."[b]
17 Then he adds:

"Their sins and lawless acts
I will remember no more."[c]
18 And where these have been forgiven, sacrifice for sin is no longer necessary."
(Hebrews 10:11-18)
The high priest Jesus, after offering His sacrifice, then He "sat down at the right hand of God" (verse 12), and God made his "enemies His footstool"- a fulfilment of the prophesy about Jesus found in Psalm 110:1.

And what is the proper conclusion to this? We are to approach God with confidence- the confidence of those truly and profoundly forgiven- and serve the Lord with joy and persevere (and grow!) in our faith: *"Therefore, brothers and sisters, since we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus, 20 by a new and living way opened for us through the curtain, that is, his body, 21 and since we have a great priest over the house of God, 22 let us draw near to God with a sincere heart and with the full assurance that faith brings, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and having our bodies washed with pure water. 23 Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful."* (Heb. 10:19-23).

Ezekiel 7-9 November 14, 2014 Hebrews 10:24-39

The end is near! This sign can be seen often in major citie, where "sidewalk preachers" proclaim the imminent coming of God/Jesus and judgment. In March 2011, the evangelist Harold Camping of Family Bible Radio made one of the most recent predictions of this sort (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Harold_Camping). We have been warned by jesus Himself that no one knows the time of the Second Coming, not even the Son – only the Father (Matthew 24:36 *"But about that day or hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.")* The end described here in Ezekiel is a more limited scope disaster- the end of things in the lives of God's people as they once knew them. Certainly they had already experienced an "end" when the invasion by Babylon and subsequent captivity occurred! Ezekiel proclaims: *"The word of the Lord came to me: 2 "Son of man, this is what the Sovereign Lord says to the land of Israel:*

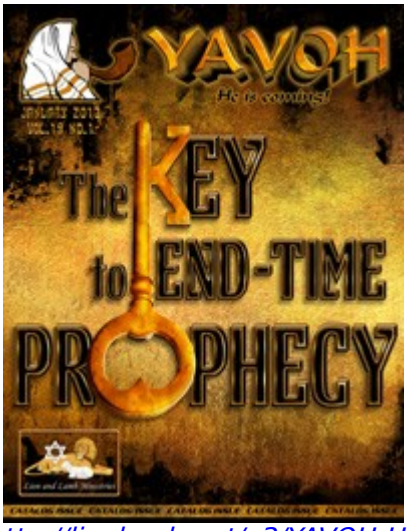
"'The end! The end has come
upon the four corners of the land!
3 The end is now upon you,
and I will unleash my anger against you.
I will judge you according to your conduct
and repay you for all your detestable practices.
4 I will not look on you with pity;
I will not spare you.
I will surely repay you for your conduct
and for the detestable practices among you.
"'Then you will know that I am the Lord.'

5 “This is what the Sovereign Lord says:

“‘Disaster! Unheard-of[a] disaster!
See, it comes!
6 The end has come!
The end has come!
It has roused itself against you.
See, it comes!
7 Doom has come upon you,
upon you who dwell in the land.
The time has come! The day is near!
There is panic, not joy, on the mountains.
8 I am about to pour out my wrath on you
and spend my anger against you.
I will judge you according to your conduct
and repay you for all your detestable practices.
9 I will not look on you with pity;
I will not spare you.
I will repay you for your conduct
and for the detestable practices among you.
“‘Then you will know that it is I the Lord who strikes you.

10 “‘See, the day!
See, it comes!
Doom has burst forth,
the rod has budded,
arrogance has blossomed!
11 Violence has arisen,[b]
a rod to punish the wicked.
None of the people will be left,
none of that crowd—
none of their wealth,
nothing of value.
12 The time has come!
The day has arrived!
Let not the buyer rejoice
nor the seller grieve,
for my wrath is on the whole crowd.
13 The seller will not recover
the property that was sold—
as long as both buyer and seller live.
For the vision concerning the whole crowd
will not be reversed.
Because of their sins, not one of them
will preserve their life.” (Ezek. 7:1-13)

Things are so desperate, and the famine so great, that “silver and gold” will be treated as worthless- after all, you can’t “eat gold”!:
“‘They will throw their silver into the streets,
and their gold will be treated as a thing unclean.
Their silver and gold
will not be able to deliver them
in the day of the Lord’s wrath.
It will not satisfy their hunger
or fill their stomachs,
for it has caused them to stumble into sin.” (Ezek. 7:19)



http://lionlamb.net/v3/YAVOH-HeisComing/2013/01

One of the major reasons that God was punishing Judah in this way was that even the priesthood had become corrupt. As Geoffrey Chaucer wrote in the Canterbury Tales about a corrupt priest ““. . . if gold rust, what then will iron do? For if a priest be foul in whom we trust, No wonder that a common man should rust. . . .”. The priesthood in Judah was similarly corrupt, including idol worship and other “detestable practices” in the conduct of sacrifice and worship: *“In the sixth year, in the sixth month on the fifth day, while I was sitting in my house and the elders of Judah were sitting before me, the hand of the Sovereign Lord came on me there. 2 I looked, and I saw a figure like that of a man. From what appeared to be his waist down he was like fire, and from there up his appearance was as bright as glowing metal. 3 He stretched out what looked like a hand and took me by the hair of my head. The Spirit lifted me up between earth and heaven and in visions of God he took me to Jerusalem, to the entrance of the north gate of the inner court, where the idol that provokes to jealousy stood. 4 And there before me was the glory of the God of Israel, as in the vision I had seen in the plain.*

5 Then he said to me, “Son of man, look toward the north.” So I looked, and in the entrance north of the gate of the altar I saw this idol of jealousy.

6 And he said to me, “Son of man, do you see what they are doing—the utterly detestable things the Israelites are doing here, things that will drive me far from my sanctuary? But you will see things that are even more detestable.”

7 Then he brought me to the entrance to the court. I looked, and I saw a hole in the wall. 8 He said to me, “Son of man, now dig into the wall.” So I dug into the wall and saw a doorway there.

9 And he said to me, “Go in and see the wicked and detestable things they are doing here.” 10 So I went in and looked, and I saw portrayed all over the walls all kinds of crawling things and unclean animals and all the idols of Israel. 11 In front of them stood seventy elders of Israel, and Jaazaniah son of Shaphan was standing among them. Each had a censer in his hand, and a fragrant cloud of incense was rising.

12 He said to me, “Son of man, have you seen what the elders of Israel are doing in the darkness, each at the shrine of his own idol? They say, ‘The Lord does not see us; the Lord has forsaken the land.’” 13 Again, he said, “You will see them doing things that are even more detestable.”

14 Then he brought me to the entrance of the north gate of the house of the Lord, and I saw women sitting there, mourning the god Tammuz. 15 He said to me, “Do you see this, son of man? You will see things that are even more detestable than this.”

16 He then brought me into the inner court of the house of the Lord, and there at the entrance to the temple, between the portico and the altar, were about twenty-five men. With their backs toward the temple of the Lord and their faces toward the east, they were bowing down to the sun in the east.

17 He said to me, “Have you seen this, son of man? Is it a trivial matter for the people of Judah to do the detestable things they are doing here? Must they also fill the land with violence and continually arouse my anger? Look at them putting the branch to their nose! 18 Therefore I will deal with them in anger; I will not look on them with pity or spare them. Although they shout in my ears, I will not listen to them.” (Ezekiel 8:1-18). The appearance of the figure that appears to Ezekiel 7:2 is similar to the one that appeared in Ezekiel 1- this “figure” is most likely a type or preincarnate appearance of the Lord (http://www.sacred-texts.com/bib/cmt/kad/eze008.htm). God “will not spare them” (verse 18) simply because they have knowingly taken that which is holy and made it into a filthy and detestable thing to the Lord. They have violated several of the basic commandments, including the prohibition against “other gods” and the keeping of the Sabbath. These are serious sins, with equally serious consequences!

The Scripture teaches that the “wages of sin is death”. We have seen this graphically illustrated a number of times in the Hebrew Scriptures, notable at Korah’s rebellion (Numbers 16), at the rebellion of the people with the Golden calf (Exodus 32), and many others starting with Genesis 2:17. *(“For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.”*- Romans 6:23.). Here the “scribe” is told to kill the idoalters, and the terror that Ezekile feels is not only due to the massive nature of this slaughter but also Ezekiel’s concern that the faithful people of God not be completely wiped out: *“Then I heard him call out in a loud voice, “Bring near those who are appointed to execute judgment on the city,*

each with a weapon in his hand." 2 And I saw six men coming from the direction of the upper gate, which faces north, each with a deadly weapon in his hand. With them was a man clothed in linen who had a writing kit at his side. They came in and stood beside the bronze altar. 3 Now the glory of the God of Israel went up from above the cherubim, where it had been, and moved to the threshold of the temple. Then the Lord called to the man clothed in linen who had the writing kit at his side 4 and said to him, "Go throughout the city of Jerusalem and put a mark on the foreheads of those who grieve and lament over all the detestable things that are done in it."

5 As I listened, he said to the others, "Follow him through the city and kill, without showing pity or compassion. 6 Slaughter the old men, the young men and women, the mothers and children, but do not touch anyone who has the mark. Begin at my sanctuary." So they began with the old men who were in front of the temple.

7 Then he said to them, "Defile the temple and fill the courts with the slain. Go!" So they went out and began killing throughout the city. 8 While they were killing and I was left alone, I fell facedown, crying out, "Alas, Sovereign Lord! Are you going to destroy the entire remnant of Israel in this outpouring of your wrath on Jerusalem?" (Ezek. 9:1-8)

God certainly has no need to justify Himself, but he does answer Ezekiel's question: *"He answered me, "The sin of the people of Israel and Judah is exceedingly great; the land is full of bloodshed and the city is full of injustice. They say, 'The Lord has forsaken the land; the Lord does not see.' 10 So I will not look on them with pity or spare them, but I will bring down on their own heads what they have done." 11 Then the man in linen with the writing kit at his side brought back word, saying, "I have done as you commanded."* (Ezek. 8:9-11)

Hebrews 10:24-39

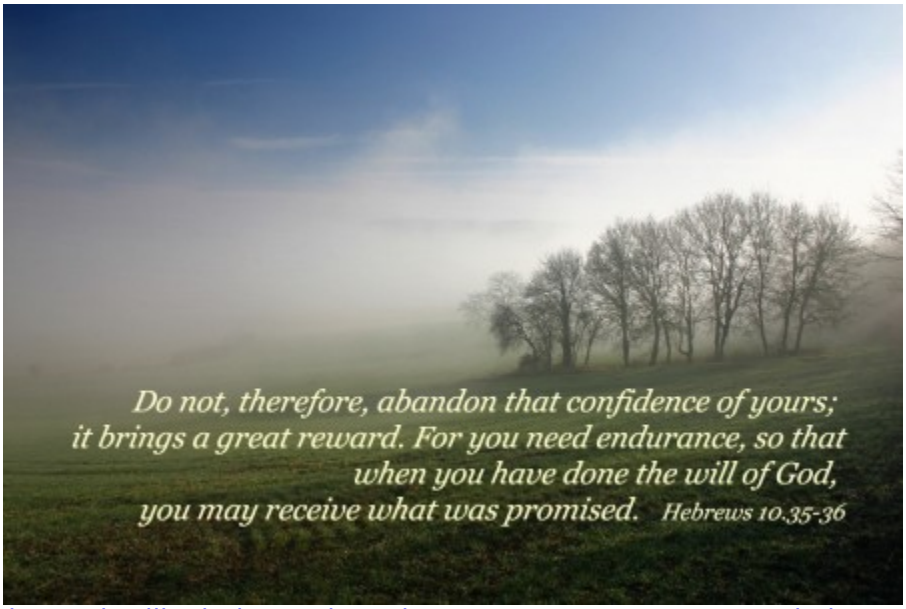
We must always be extraordinarily careful in describing or defining what constitutes an "unpardonable sin". One of the key Scriptures to examine in this regard is 1 Timothy 2:3-4 *"This is good and acceptable in the sight of God our Savior, who desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth."* As well as Ezekiel 18:23: *"Do I take any pleasure in the death of the wicked? declares the Sovereign LORD. Rather, am I not pleased when they turn from their ways and live?"* So it is clear that the DESIRE of God's heart is that we be saved and not perish, but the awful truth is that the sinful desires of mankind will lead us to "go our own way", and to constantly and continuously reject the calling, nudging, confrontation and correction of God. When we turn our backs to the Holy Spirit, we condemn ourselves. God will not "force" us to choose Him- we must do this out of our own wills. When we constantly reject Him and say "No" to Him, we harden our hearts and can no longer hear, feel or otherwise experience the call of God on our lives. It is not he who condemns us- he offers us grace we don't deserve and would have never sought! It is we who are to blame.

Hebrews states the truth of this as follows: *"If we deliberately keep on sinning after we have received the knowledge of the truth, no sacrifice for sins is left, 27 but only*

a fearful expectation of judgment and of raging fire that will consume the enemies of God." (Hebrews 10:26-27) The key phrase here is "deliberately keep on sinning".

We must do more than receive salvation to live lives pleasing to God. Our salvation is only the beginning. We must learn- sometimes painfully and through trials- to "persevere". The word perseveres here has multiple layers of meaning: it can be taken to mean "to survive"- a difficult task in a dark and fallen world that loves to listen to the Enemy. Persevere also means to continue growing, and to bear fruit for the Lord. (http://www.desiringgod.org/articles/the-necessity-of-perseverance-in-faith-and-the-assurance-of-salvation) Remember that Jesus taught us that you will know them by their "fruit" (Matthew 7:16 *"By their fruit you will recognize them. Do people pick grapes from thornbushes, or figs from thistles?*") The author of Hebrews tells it this way: *"You need to persevere so that when you have done the will of God, you will receive what he has promised. 37 For,*
"In just a little while,
he who is coming will come
and will not delay."
38 And,

"But my righteous one will live by faith.
And I take no pleasure
in the one who shrinks back."
39 But we do not belong to those who shrink back and are destroyed, but to those who have faith and are saved." (Hebrews 10:36-39)



http://dwellingintheword.wordpress.com/2013/12/09/1201-hebrews-1019-38/

Ezekiel 10-12 November 15, 2014 Hebrews 11:1-19

The punishment and judgment continue. The Glory of the Lord is removed from the Temple. This "glory" had descended on the temple after it was built by Solomon, and now it was departing- showing God's displeasure with His rebellious and idolatrous people. The imagery is the same as in Ezekiel 1 by the Kebar River- the

same starnge creatures administer God's will: *"I looked, and I saw the likeness of a throne of lapis lazuli above the vault that was over the heads of the cherubim. 2 The Lord said to the man clothed in linen, "Go in among the wheels beneath the cherubim. Fill your hands with burning coals from among the cherubim and scatter them over the city." And as I watched, he went in.*

3 Now the cherubim were standing on the south side of the temple when the man went in, and a cloud filled the inner court. 4 Then the glory of the Lord rose from above the cherubim and moved to the threshold of the temple. The cloud filled the temple, and the court was full of the radiance of the glory of the Lord. 5 The sound of the wings of the cherubim could be heard as far away as the outer court, like the voice of God Almighty when he speaks.

6 When the Lord commanded the man in linen, "Take fire from among the wheels, from among the cherubim," the man went in and stood beside a wheel. 7 Then one of the cherubim reached out his hand to the fire that was among them. He took up some of it and put it into the hands of the man in linen, who took it and went out. 8 (Under the wings of the cherubim could be seen what looked like human hands.)" (Ezek. 10:1-8) The glory of God then departs: *"Then the glory of the Lord departed from over the threshold of the temple and stopped above the cherubim. 19 While I watched, the cherubim spread their wings and rose from the ground, and as they went, the wheels went with them. They stopped at the entrance of the east gate of the Lord's house, and the glory of the God of Israel was above them.*

20 These were the living creatures I had seen beneath the God of Israel by the Kebar River, and I realized that they were cherubim. 21 Each had four faces and four wings, and under their wings was what looked like human hands. 22 Their faces had the same appearance as those I had seen by the Kebar River. Each one went straight ahead." (Ezek. 10:18-22)

God then exercises judgment on the corrupt and idolatrous leaders of the people. They should have led the people of God with exemplary and holy lives, yet they were models of rebellion and evil: *"Then the Spirit lifted me up and brought me to the gate of the house of the Lord that faces east. There at the entrance of the gate were twenty-five men, and I saw among them Jaazaniah son of Azzur and Pelatiah son of Benaiah, leaders of the people. 2 The Lord said to me, "Son of man, these are the men who are plotting evil and giving wicked advice in this city. 3 They say, 'Haven't our houses been recently rebuilt? This city is a pot, and we are the meat in it.' 4 Therefore prophesy against them; prophesy, son of man."*

5 Then the Spirit of the Lord came on me, and he told me to say: "This is what the Lord says: That is what you are saying, you leaders in Israel, but I know what is going through your mind. 6 You have killed many people in this city and filled its streets with the dead.

7 "Therefore this is what the Sovereign Lord says: The bodies you have thrown there are the meat and this city is the pot, but I will drive you out of it. 8 You fear the sword, and the sword is what I will bring against you, declares the Sovereign Lord. 9 I will drive you out of the city and deliver you into the hands of foreigners and inflict punishment on you. 10 You will fall by the sword, and I will execute judgment on you

at the borders of Israel. Then you will know that I am the Lord. 11 This city will not be a pot for you, nor will you be the meat in it; I will execute judgment on you at the borders of Israel. 12 And you will know that I am the Lord, for you have not followed my decrees or kept my laws but have conformed to the standards of the nations around you."

13 Now as I was prophesying, Pelatiah son of Benaiah died. Then I fell facedown and cried out in a loud voice, "Alas, Sovereign Lord! Will you completely destroy the remnant of Israel?"(Ezek 11:1-13) Ezekiel again cries out to God, hoping the He will not destroy the remnant of His people.

God once again promises that he will restore the people to the Land: *"14 The word of the Lord came to me: 15 "Son of man, the people of Jerusalem have said of your fellow exiles and all the other Israelites, 'They are far away from the Lord; this land was given to us as our possession.'*

16 "Therefore say: 'This is what the Sovereign Lord says: Although I sent them far away among the nations and scattered them among the countries, yet for a little while I have been a sanctuary for them in the countries where they have gone.'

17 "Therefore say: 'This is what the Sovereign Lord says: I will gather you from the nations and bring you back from the countries where you have been scattered, and I will give you back the land of Israel again.'" (Ezek. 11:14-17)

Ezekiel is then told to "act out" the exile of the people, and to act as a "sign" to them. God is trying every means to communicate with His people- and His goal is always restoration, not punishment: *"The word of the Lord came to me: 2 "Son of man, you are living among a rebellious people. They have eyes to see but do not see and ears to hear but do not hear, for they are a rebellious people.*

3 "Therefore, son of man, pack your belongings for exile and in the daytime, as they watch, set out and go from where you are to another place. Perhaps they will understand, though they are a rebellious people. 4 During the daytime, while they watch, bring out your belongings packed for exile. Then in the evening, while they are watching, go out like those who go into exile. 5 While they watch, dig through the wall and take your belongings out through it. 6 Put them on your shoulder as they are watching and carry them out at dusk. Cover your face so that you cannot see the land, for I have made you a sign to the Israelites."

7 So I did as I was commanded. During the day I brought out my things packed for exile. Then in the evening I dug through the wall with my hands. I took my belongings out at dusk, carrying them on my shoulders while they watched.

8 In the morning the word of the Lord came to me: 9 "Son of man, did not the Israelites, that rebellious people, ask you, 'What are you doing?'

10 "Say to them, 'This is what the Sovereign Lord says: This prophecy concerns the prince in Jerusalem and all the Israelites who are there.' 11 Say to them, 'I am a sign to you.'

“As I have done, so it will be done to them. They will go into exile as captives.” (Ezek 12:1-11)

To those who would say to Ezekiel that this prophesy will be fulfilled only in the far distant future, he is to proclaim clearly tjhat the judgment of God is imminent- this will be an immediate outcome. They can take no comfort in the “status quo”- it will change- and rapidly: *“The word of the Lord came to me: 27 “Son of man, the Israelites are saying, ‘The vision he sees is for many years from now, and he prophesies about the distant future.’*

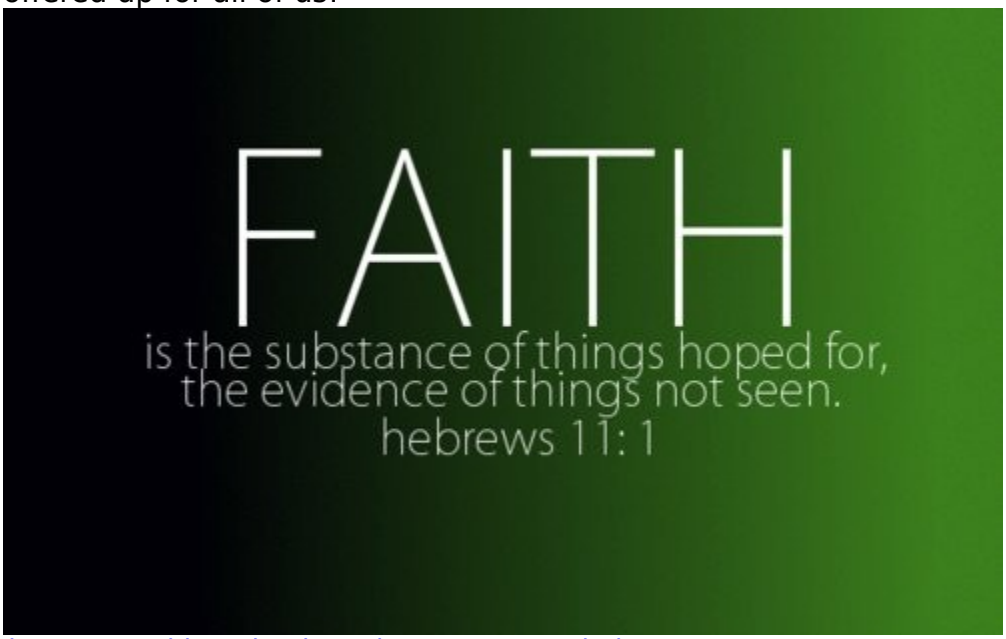
28 “Therefore say to them, ‘This is what the Sovereign Lord says: None of my words will be delayed any longer; whatever I say will be fulfilled, declares the Sovereign Lord.’” (Ezek. 12:26-28)

Hebrews 11:1-19

So what is faith? Is it “blind faith”, or “irrational faith” or faith in the “irrational, unreasonable and miraculous”? This is the caricature of true faith that the unbelieving world uses to mock and trivialize real faith. The author of Hebrews wants us to know several important things about faith. First, it is both confidence and assurance: *“Now faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see. 2 This is what the ancients were commended for.”* (Heb. 11:1-2). Secondly, it is knowledge and understanding: *“By faith we understand that the universe was formed at God’s command, so that what is seen was not made out of what was visible.”* (Heb. 11:3). It is understanding of the spiritual world that guides us into ways that please God: *“By faith Abel brought God a better offering than Cain did. By faith he was commended as righteous, when God spoke well of his offerings. And by faith Abel still speaks, even though he is dead.”* (Heb. 11:4) Faith is the means by which we are brought into God’s very presence: *“By faith Enoch was taken from this life, so that he did not experience death: “He could not be found, because God had taken him away.” For before he was taken, he was commended as one who pleased God.”* (Heb. 11:5) Faith gives us insight into the mind and workings of God, so we may act in ways that protect us and please Him: *“By faith Noah, when warned about things not yet seen, in holy fear built an ark to save his family. By his faith he condemned the world and became heir of the righteousness that is in keeping with faith.”* (Heb. 11:7). And faith was the “engine” that motivated Abram to leave everything he knew, and go to a place that God would lead him, without ever having seen it. Abram’s obedience was a result of the faith that God “credited” or “accounted” to him as saving faith. This is how Abram was saved- this is how we are saved also! *“By faith Abraham, when called to go to a place he would later receive as his inheritance, obeyed and went, even though he did not know where he was going. 9 By faith he made his home in the promised land like a stranger in a foreign country; he lived in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise. 10 For he was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God. 11 And by faith even Sarah, who was past childbearing age, was enabled to bear children because she considered him faithful who had made the promise. 12 And so from this one man, and he as good as dead, came descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and as countless as the sand on the seashore.”* (Heb. 11:8-12)

And finally, faith is the lifetime attitude of “receiving and believing”- asking ourselves what the Lord would have us to do, and allowing Him to fill us with the courage and energy to do just as He asks us- knowing he loves us and has our best interest at heart: *“All these people were still living by faith when they died. They did not receive the things promised; they only saw them and welcomed them from a distance, admitting that they were foreigners and strangers on earth. 14 People who say such things show that they are looking for a country of their own. 15 If they had been thinking of the country they had left, they would have had opportunity to return. 16 Instead, they were longing for a better country—a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared a city for them.*

17 By faith Abraham, when God tested him, offered Isaac as a sacrifice. He who had embraced the promises was about to sacrifice his one and only son, 18 even though God had said to him, “It is through Isaac that your offspring will be reckoned.” 19 Abraham reasoned that God could even raise the dead, and so in a manner of speaking he did receive Isaac back from death.” (Heb. 11:13-19). Abram had enough faith to offer his very son, just as God did later in history when the Son was offered up for all of us!



https://worshipoutloud.wordpress.com/tag/hebrews-111/

Ezekiel 13-15 November 16, 2014 Hebrews 11:20-40

Ezekiel roundly condemns the practices of the “false prophets”. These were “prophets” who spoke in the name of the Lord but spoke out of the desires and plans of their hearts and not God’s. The Lord has nothing but condemnation for them, for their disobedience in many cases had a multiplier effect- it led to the disobedience of many others: *“The word of the Lord came to me: 2 “Son of man, prophesy against the prophets of Israel who are now prophesying. Say to those who prophesy out of their own imagination: ‘Hear the word of the Lord! 3 This is what the Sovereign Lord says: Woe to the foolish prophets who follow their own spirit and have seen nothing! 4 Your prophets, Israel, are like jackals among ruins.”* (Ezek. 13:1-4)

The punishment and judgment from God will be swift and sure: *"'Therefore this is what the Sovereign Lord says: Because of your false words and lying visions, I am against you, declares the Sovereign Lord. 9 My hand will be against the prophets who see false visions and utter lying divinations. They will not belong to the council of my people or be listed in the records of Israel, nor will they enter the land of Israel. Then you will know that I am the Sovereign Lord.*

10 "'Because they lead my people astray, saying, "Peace," when there is no peace, and because, when a flimsy wall is built, they cover it with whitewash, 11 therefore tell those who cover it with whitewash that it is going to fall. Rain will come in torrents, and I will send hailstones hurtling down, and violent winds will burst forth. 12 When the wall collapses, will people not ask you, "Where is the whitewash you covered it with?"

13 "'Therefore this is what the Sovereign Lord says: In my wrath I will unleash a violent wind, and in my anger hailstones and torrents of rain will fall with destructive fury. 14 I will tear down the wall you have covered with whitewash and will level it to the ground so that its foundation will be laid bare. When it falls, you will be destroyed in it; and you will know that I am the Lord. 15 So I will pour out my wrath against the wall and against those who covered it with whitewash. I will say to you, "The wall is gone and so are those who whitewashed it, 16 those prophets of Israel who prophesied to Jerusalem and saw visions of peace for her when there was no peace, declares the Sovereign Lord."'(Ezek. 13:8-16).

God then speaks out against two kinds of idols- 1) the kind hidden in the heart ("idols in their hearts- verse 3); 2) the external idols that are manmade and visible ("wicked stumbling blocks before their faces"- verse 3). He detests them both, and repeatedly warned the people against practicing idolatry, but His teaching was ignored: *"Some of the elders of Israel came to me and sat down in front of me. 2 Then the word of the Lord came to me: 3 "Son of man, these men have set up idols in their hearts and put wicked stumbling blocks before their faces. Should I let them inquire of me at all? 4 Therefore speak to them and tell them, 'This is what the Sovereign Lord says: When any of the Israelites set up idols in their hearts and put a wicked stumbling block before their faces and then go to a prophet, I the Lord will answer them myself in keeping with their great idolatry. 5 I will do this to recapture the hearts of the people of Israel, who have all deserted me for their idols.'*
6 "Therefore say to the people of Israel, 'This is what the Sovereign Lord says: Repent! Turn from your idols and renounce all your detestable practices!
7 "'When any of the Israelites or any foreigner residing in Israel separate themselves from me and set up idols in their hearts and put a wicked stumbling block before their faces and then go to a prophet to inquire of me, I the Lord will answer them myself. 8 I will set my face against them and make them an example and a byword. I will remove them from my people. Then you will know that I am the Lord." (Ezek 14:1-8) These idolaters will be removed from God's people and will be set as an "example and a byword" (verse 8).

Jerusalem, once the crown jewel of the Promised Land, will be reduced to destruction and ruins, and many will perish within its walls. This God will do to show clearly His power, authority and moral judgment: *"For this is what the Sovereign*

Lord says: How much worse will it be when I send against Jerusalem my four dreadful judgments—sword and famine and wild beasts and plague—to kill its men and their animals! 22 Yet there will be some survivors—sons and daughters who will be brought out of it. They will come to you, and when you see their conduct and their actions, you will be consoled regarding the disaster I have brought on Jerusalem—every disaster I have brought on it. 23 You will be consoled when you see their conduct and their actions, for you will know that I have done nothing in it without cause, declares the Sovereign Lord." (Ezek. 14:21-23).

Then God tells Ezekiel that he regards Jerusalem as a "useless vine". The vine could have been a beautiful and useful thing but now it is shriveled and useless: *"The word of the Lord came to me: 2 "Son of man, how is the wood of a vine different from that of a branch from any of the trees in the forest? 3 Is wood ever taken from it to make anything useful? Do they make pegs from it to hang things on? 4 And after it is thrown on the fire as fuel and the fire burns both ends and chars the middle, is it then useful for anything? 5 If it was not useful for anything when it was whole, how much less can it be made into something useful when the fire has burned it and it is charred?*

6 "Therefore this is what the Sovereign Lord says: As I have given the wood of the vine among the trees of the forest as fuel for the fire, so will I treat the people living in Jerusalem. 7 I will set my face against them. Although they have come out of the fire, the fire will yet consume them. And when I set my face against them, you will know that I am the Lord. 8 I will make the land desolate because they have been unfaithful, declares the Sovereign Lord." (Ezekiel 15:1-8)

Hebrews 11:20-40

The author of Hebrews then holds up for us examples from Scripture as to the "heroes of the faith" from the Old Testament. These wonderfully faithful people all trusted God with their lives and souls, and yet they did not receive the final blessing of knowing the Christ- Jesus of Nazareth: *"By faith Isaac blessed Jacob and Esau in regard to their future. 21 By faith Jacob, when he was dying, blessed each of Joseph's sons, and worshiped as he leaned on the top of his staff. 22 By faith Joseph, when his end was near, spoke about the exodus of the Israelites from Egypt and gave instructions concerning the burial of his bones. 23 By faith Moses' parents hid him for three months after he was born, because they saw he was no ordinary child, and they were not afraid of the king's edict. 24 By faith Moses, when he had grown up, refused to be known as the son of Pharaoh's daughter. 25 He chose to be mistreated along with the people of God rather than to enjoy the fleeting pleasures of sin. 26 He regarded disgrace for the sake of Christ as of greater value than the treasures of Egypt, because he was looking ahead to his reward. 27 By faith he left Egypt, not fearing the king's anger; he persevered because he saw him who is invisible. 28 By faith he kept the Passover and the application of blood, so that the destroyer of the firstborn would not touch the firstborn of Israel. 29 By faith the people passed through the Red Sea as on dry land; but when the Egyptians tried to do so, they were drowned. 30 By faith the walls of Jericho fell, after the army had marched around them for seven days. 31 By faith the prostitute Rahab, because she welcomed the spies, was not killed with those who were disobedient."* (Hebrews 11:20-31)

The author then tells us there ar almost countless more- some recorded and some unrecorded, that exhibited the life changing faith that God honors so wonderfull well*: "And what more shall I say? I do not have time to tell about Gideon, Barak, Samson and Jephthah, about David and Samuel and the prophets, 33 who through faith conquered kingdoms, administered justice, and gained what was promised; who shut the mouths of lions, 34 quenched the fury of the flames, and escaped the edge of the sword; whose weakness was turned to strength; and who became powerful in battle and routed foreign armies. 35 Women received back their dead, raised to life again. There were others who were tortured, refusing to be released so that they might gain an even better resurrection. 36 Some faced jeers and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. 37 They were put to death by stoning; they were sawed in two; they were killed by the sword. They went about in sheepskins and goatskins, destitute, persecuted and mistreated— 38 the world was not worthy of them. They wandered in deserts and mountains, living in caves and in holes in the ground. 39 These were all commended for their faith, yet none of them received what had been promised, 40 since God had planned something better for us so that only together with us would they be made perfect."* (Hebrews 11:32-40)

They were saved through their strong faith in the Messiah to come- even though they did not know His Name and experience His presence as we did (and do!). Later they would discover His Name, and be blessed and joyful in their discovery!

http://www.bobyandian.com/product/hebrews-11-gods-hall-of-fame-mp3s-2/

Ezekiel 16 November 17, 2014 Hebrews 12

Another image of idolatry! Just as Hosea's relationship with his prostitute/wife Gomer illustrated Israel's unfaithfulness to God, the image of Israel itself as an unfaithful wife also undelines the similarities between idolatry and sexual unfaithfulness. God is the "true love", the "first love" of Israel, and yet she lusts after other lovers. God describes it this way: *"The word of the Lord came to me: 2 "Son of man, confront Jerusalem with her detestable practices 3 and say, 'This is what the Sovereign Lord says to Jerusalem: Your ancestry and birth were in the land*

of the Canaanites; your father was an Amorite and your mother a Hittite. 4 On the day you were born your cord was not cut, nor were you washed with water to make you clean, nor were you rubbed with salt or wrapped in cloths. 5 No one looked on you with pity or had compassion enough to do any of these things for you. Rather, you were thrown out into the open field, for on the day you were born you were despised.

6 “‘Then I passed by and saw you kicking about in your blood, and as you lay there in your blood I said to you, “Live!” 7 I made you grow like a plant of the field. You grew and developed and entered puberty. Your breasts had formed and your hair had grown, yet you were stark naked.

8 “‘Later I passed by, and when I looked at you and saw that you were old enough for love, I spread the corner of my garment over you and covered your naked body. I gave you my solemn oath and entered into a covenant with you, declares the Sovereign Lord, and you became mine.

9 “‘I bathed you with water and washed the blood from you and put ointments on you. 10 I clothed you with an embroidered dress and put sandals of fine leather on you. I dressed you in fine linen and covered you with costly garments. 11 I adorned you with jewelry: I put bracelets on your arms and a necklace around your neck, 12 and I put a ring on your nose, earrings on your ears and a beautiful crown on your head. 13 So you were adorned with gold and silver; your clothes were of fine linen and costly fabric and embroidered cloth. Your food was honey, olive oil and the finest flour. You became very beautiful and rose to be a queen. 14 And your fame spread among the nations on account of your beauty, because the splendor I had given you made your beauty perfect, declares the Sovereign Lord.

15 “‘But you trusted in your beauty and used your fame to become a prostitute. You lavished your favors on anyone who passed by and your beauty became his. 16 You took some of your garments to make gaudy high places, where you carried on your prostitution. You went to him, and he possessed your beauty. 17 You also took the fine jewelry I gave you, the jewelry made of my gold and silver, and you made for yourself male idols and engaged in prostitution with them. 18 And you took your embroidered clothes to put on them, and you offered my oil and incense before them. 19 Also the food I provided for you—the flour, olive oil and honey I gave you to eat—you offered as fragrant incense before them. That is what happened, declares the Sovereign Lord.” (Ezekiel 16:1-19). God had literally rescued Israel, provided for her and comforted her, and took a solemn oath- a covenat relationship- of faithfulness with her. Yet Israel “trusted in your beauty” (verse 15) and used the gifts of God as signs of entitlement insterad of trust, of unfettered freedom as licence, and destroyed the beauty of the relationshiop out of greed, self righteousness and selfishness!

Because of this, God’s wrath will be unleashed until it is spent and Israel realizes to her sorrow what a terrible state she has chosen to put herself in. God will not tolerate this rebellion forever, His righteousness demands consequences for flagrant sin: *“‘You adulterous wife! You prefer strangers to your own husband! 33 All prostitutes receive gifts, but you give gifts to all your lovers, bribing them to come to you from everywhere for your illicit favors. 34 So in your prostitution you are the*

opposite of others; no one runs after you for your favors. You are the very opposite, for you give payment and none is given to you.

35 “‘Therefore, you prostitute, hear the word of the Lord! 36 This is what the Sovereign Lord says: Because you poured out your lust and exposed your naked body in your promiscuity with your lovers, and because of all your detestable idols, and because you gave them your children’s blood, 37 therefore I am going to gather all your lovers, with whom you found pleasure, those you loved as well as those you hated. I will gather them against you from all around and will strip you in front of them, and they will see you stark naked. 38 I will sentence you to the punishment of women who commit adultery and who shed blood; I will bring on you the blood vengeance of my wrath and jealous anger. 39 Then I will deliver you into the hands of your lovers, and they will tear down your mounds and destroy your lofty shrines. They will strip you of your clothes and take your fine jewelry and leave you stark naked. 40 They will bring a mob against you, who will stone you and hack you to pieces with their swords. 41 They will burn down your houses and inflict punishment on you in the sight of many women. I will put a stop to your prostitution, and you will no longer pay your lovers. 42 Then my wrath against you will subside and my jealous anger will turn away from you; I will be calm and no longer angry.” (Ezek. 16:32-42).

There is always a glimmer of hope- God desires correction and reclamation, restoration of the right relationship between Himself and the people- so He offers hope and salvation: *“‘This is what the Sovereign Lord says: I will deal with you as you deserve, because you have despised my oath by breaking the covenant. 60 Yet I will remember the covenant I made with you in the days of your youth, and I will establish an everlasting covenant with you. 61 Then you will remember your ways and be ashamed when you receive your sisters, both those who are older than you and those who are younger. I will give them to you as daughters, but not on the basis of my covenant with you. 62 So I will establish my covenant with you, and you will know that I am the Lord. 63 Then, when I make atonement for you for all you have done, you will remember and be ashamed and never again open your mouth because of your humiliation, declares the Sovereign Lord.’”*(Ezek. 16:59-63) God will make atonement…with the Son! Better days are surely coming for the errant bride Israel.

Hebrews 12

Life is short! Play hard! Thus goes the adage about living life to its fullest. The image used in Hebrews is similar- that of runners competing in a race, surrounded by a great crowd (a “cloud”) of witnesses. We are to persevere, run the race to the fullest of our abilities, and rpess on toward the prize- our reward will be great, for He will greet us at the finish: *“Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, 2 fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. 3 Consider him who endured such opposition from sinners, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.”* (Heb.12:1-3).

Hebrews is ruthlessly honest it is hard to fight against sin. The enemy knows all our weaknesses, and "pushes our buttons" only like one who knows us- but we are to be glad because we realize that God is disciplining us- making us stronger and more mature- with the goal of "fitting us for Heaven". God (and we) only disciplines the children He loves: *"In your struggle against sin, you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood. 5 And have you completely forgotten this word of encouragement that addresses you as a father addresses his son? It says,*

"My son, do not make light of the Lord's discipline,
and do not lose heart when he rebukes you,
6 because the Lord disciplines the one he loves,
and he chastens everyone he accepts as his son."
7 Endure hardship as discipline; God is treating you as his children. For what children are not disciplined by their father? 8 If you are not disciplined—and everyone undergoes discipline—then you are not legitimate, not true sons and daughters at all." (Heb. 12:4-8)

The author of Hebrews then sncourages us to live holy lives, lives that are "living in peace" with others in our sphere of influence. This requires spiritual maturity and lots of practice- it does not come naturally to our sin-influenced minds and hearts. But practice we can and must: *"Make every effort to live in peace with everyone and to be holy; without holiness no one will see the Lord. 15 See to it that no one falls short of the grace of God and that no bitter root grows up to cause trouble and defile many. 16 See that no one is sexually immoral, or is godless like Esau, who for a single meal sold his inheritance rights as the oldest son. 17 Afterward, as you know, when he wanted to inherit this blessing, he was rejected. Even though he sought the blessing with tears, he could not change what he had done."* (Heb. 12:14-17).

We then are given a fascinating contrast between the mountain of fear- the mountain on which God spole to Moses through the burning bush- and the mountain of joy- Zion! The fear and legalism of the past has been supplanted with the wonderful saving love of Jesus, who speaks a "better word" than the blood of Abel: *"You have not come to a mountain that can be touched and that is burning with fire; to darkness, gloom and storm; 19 to a trumpet blast or to such a voice speaking words that those who heard it begged that no further word be spoken to them, 20 because they could not bear what was commanded: "If even an animal touches the mountain, it must be stoned to death." 21 The sight was so terrifying that Moses said, "I am trembling with fear." 22 But you have come to Mount Zion, to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem. You have come to thousands upon thousands of angels in joyful assembly, 23 to the church of the firstborn, whose names are written in heaven. You have come to God, the Judge of all, to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, 24 to Jesus the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel."* (Heb. 12:18-24)

http://www.dailylifeverse.com/posts/images/2012/07/hebrews-12-14.jpg?s=full

Ezekeil 17-19 November 18, 2014 Hebrews 13

The use of parables as illustrations of spiritual truth is found theoughtout the Scriptures. Here we have a particularly vivid and memorable portait of the "cedars of Lebanon"- known for their lush majesty, and two eagles. The Scripture is: *"The word of the Lord came to me: 2 "Son of man, set forth an allegory and tell it to the Israelites as a parable. 3 Say to them, 'This is what the Sovereign Lord says: A great eagle with powerful wings, long feathers and full plumage of varied colors came to Lebanon. Taking hold of the top of a cedar, 4 he broke off its topmost shoot and carried it away to a land of merchants, where he planted it in a city of traders. 5 "'He took one of the seedlings of the land and put it in fertile soil. He planted it like a willow by abundant water, 6 and it sprouted and became a low, spreading vine. Its branches turned toward him, but its roots remained under it. So it became a vine and produced branches and put out leafy boughs."* (Ezek. 17:1-6). The commentary is useful here, although as one author put it, weshould "proclaim" the poetry rather than "explain" it, since explanation can "kill poetry"! (https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=1300). This allegory/parable does not point to a specific time or set of events in Israel's history, so it can then be usefull applied to many different scenarios.

God then tells Ezekiel at least one of the meanings of this poem, as it applies to the Babylonian captivity they are now suffering under: *"Then the word of the Lord came to me: 12 "Say to this rebellious people, 'Do you not know what these things mean?' Say to them: 'The king of Babylon went to Jerusalem and carried off her king and her nobles, bringing them back with him to Babylon. 13 Then he took a member of the royal family and made a treaty with him, putting him under oath. He also carried away the leading men of the land, 14 so that the kingdom would be brought low, unable to rise again, surviving only by keeping his treaty. 15 But the king rebelled against him by sending his envoys to Egypt to get horses and a large army. Will he succeed? Will he who does such things escape? Will he break the treaty and yet escape?*

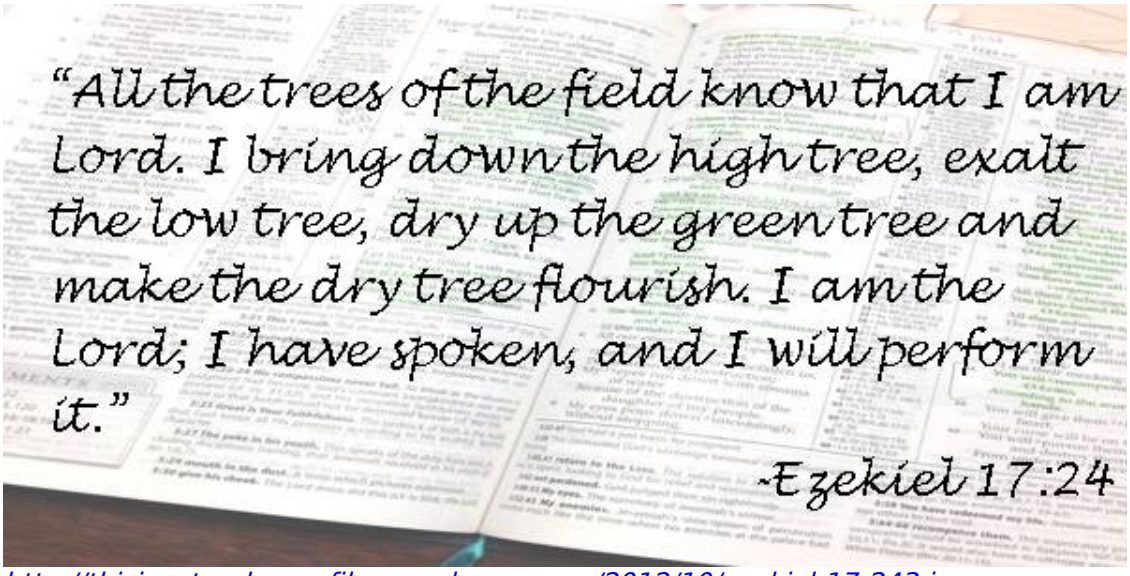
16 “‘As surely as I live, declares the Sovereign Lord, he shall die in Babylon, in the land of the king who put him on the throne, whose oath he despised and whose treaty he broke. 17 Pharaoh with his mighty army and great horde will be of no help to him in war, when ramps are built and siege works erected to destroy many lives. 18 He despised the oath by breaking the covenant. Because he had given his hand in pledge and yet did all these things, he shall not escape.

19 “‘Therefore this is what the Sovereign Lord says: As surely as I live, I will repay him for despising my oath and breaking my covenant. 20 I will spread my net for him, and he will be caught in my snare. I will bring him to Babylon and execute judgment on him there because he was unfaithful to me. 21 All his choice troops will fall by the sword, and the survivors will be scattered to the winds. Then you will know that I the Lord have spoken.

22 “‘This is what the Sovereign Lord says: I myself will take a shoot from the very top of a cedar and plant it; I will break off a tender sprig from its topmost shoots and plant it on a high and lofty mountain. 23 On the mountain heights of Israel I will plant it; it will produce branches and bear fruit and become a splendid cedar. Birds of every kind will nest in it; they will find shelter in the shade of its branches. 24 All the trees of the forest will know that I the Lord bring down the tall tree and make the low tree grow tall. I dry up the green tree and make the dry tree flourish.

“‘I the Lord have spoken, and I will do it.’” (Ezek. 17:11-24) The application of verses 22-24 is almost universal- God is the caring and skilled husbander of the plants He has created, and He can cause his trees (or people) to flourish- even if they are “dry” (verse 24)

As is frequently true in God’s messages to the people, there is a mixture of judgment and hope, of punishment and promise of a better time, of separation and reunion.



http://thisisnotourhome.files.wordpress.com/2012/10/ezekiel-17-243.jpg

Then the issue of punishment for sin is dealt with. Some interpretations of Scripture at least imply that the “shadow” of sin is long- the sins of the fathers is shared by

their offspring into several generations. We can certainly find Scriptures that support this notion (Exodus 34:7 *“Keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children and the children's children, to the third and the fourth generation.”)* Other verses and passages of Scripture, including Ezekel 18, teach a different truth (Deut. 24:16 *““Fathers shall not be put to death because of their children, nor shall children be put to death because of their fathers. Each one shall be put to death for his own sin.”*) The passage in Ezekiel 18 reads like this: *“The word of the Lord came to me: 2 “What do you people mean by quoting this proverb about the land of Israel:*

“‘The parents eat sour grapes,
and the children’s teeth are set on edge’?
3 “As surely as I live, declares the Sovereign Lord, you will no longer quote this proverb in Israel. 4 For everyone belongs to me, the parent as well as the child—both alike belong to me. The one who sins is the one who will die.

5 “Suppose there is a righteous man
who does what is just and right.
6 He does not eat at the mountain shrines
or look to the idols of Israel.
He does not defile his neighbor’s wife
or have sexual relations with a woman during her period.
7 He does not oppress anyone,
but returns what he took in pledge for a loan.
He does not commit robbery
but gives his food to the hungry
and provides clothing for the naked.
8 He does not lend to them at interest
or take a profit from them.
He withholds his hand from doing wrong
and judges fairly between two parties.
9 He follows my decrees
and faithfully keeps my laws.
That man is righteous;
he will surely live,
declares the Sovereign Lord.
10 “Suppose he has a violent son, who sheds blood or does any of these other things 11 (though the father has done none of them):

“He eats at the mountain shrines.
He defiles his neighbor’s wife.
12 He oppresses the poor and needy.
He commits robbery.
He does not return what he took in pledge.
He looks to the idols.
He does detestable things.
13 He lends at interest and takes a profit.
Will such a man live? He will not! Because he has done all these detestable things, he is to be put to death; his blood will be on his own head.

14 “But suppose this son has a son who sees all the sins his father commits, and
though he sees them, he does not do such things:

15 “He does not eat at the mountain shrines
or look to the idols of Israel.
He does not defile his neighbor’s wife.
16 He does not oppress anyone
or require a pledge for a loan.
He does not commit robbery
but gives his food to the hungry
and provides clothing for the naked.
17 He withholds his hand from mistreating the poor
and takes no interest or profit from them.
He keeps my laws and follows my decrees.
He will not die for his father’s sin; he will surely live. 18 But his father will die for his own sin, because he practiced extortion, robbed his brother and did what was wrong among his people.” (Ezek. 18:1-18). The example here is a righteous man with both a rebellious and sinful son as well as a righteous son. The principle is simple- we will die (spiritually and physically) for our own sins- not those of others. It is true, of course, that the influence of sin can be pervasive. It is difficult for a child who has seen disobedience and disrespect for God and His Law all his life to depart from evil and become righteous. In that sense at least, the “sins of the father” are “visited” on the children (Exodus 34:7)- but the “visiting” or influence is not irresistible!

God makes it clear that he does not want to punish His children, but instead to enjoy fellowship with them. He desires that the people called by His Name “repent and live”: *“Therefore, you Israelites, I will judge each of you according to your own ways, declares the Sovereign Lord. Repent! Turn away from all your offenses; then sin will not be your downfall. 31 Rid yourselves of all the offenses you have committed, and get a new heart and a new spirit. Why will you die, people of Israel? 32 For I take no pleasure in the death of anyone, declares the Sovereign Lord. Repent and live!”* (Ezek. 18:30-32)

Then we see another vivid and compeeling poem/portrait of the “princes” of Israel- those leaders who were to guide their people into thruth and righteous living. They started off with great promise, but like the cubs of a lioness, they were then captured and taken away: *“Take up a lament concerning the princes of Israel 2 and say:*

“‘What a lioness was your mother
among the lions!
She lay down among them
and reared her cubs.
3 She brought up one of her cubs,
and he became a strong lion.
He learned to tear the prey
and he became a man-eater.
4 The nations heard about him,
and he was trapped in their pit.

They led him with hooks
to the land of Egypt.
5 “‘When she saw her hope unfulfilled,
her expectation gone,
she took another of her cubs
and made him a strong lion.
6 He prowled among the lions,
for he was now a strong lion.
He learned to tear the prey
and he became a man-eater.
7 He broke down[b] their strongholds
and devastated their towns.
The land and all who were in it
were terrified by his roaring.
8 Then the nations came against him,
those from regions round about.
They spread their net for him,
and he was trapped in their pit.
9 With hooks they pulled him into a cage
and brought him to the king of Babylon.
They put him in prison,
so his roar was heard no longer
on the mountains of Israel.
10 “‘Your mother was like a vine in your vineyard
planted by the water;
it was fruitful and full of branches
because of abundant water.
11 Its branches were strong,
fit for a ruler’s scepter.
It towered high
above the thick foliage,
conspicuous for its height
and for its many branches.
12 But it was uprooted in fury
and thrown to the ground.
The east wind made it shrivel,
it was stripped of its fruit;
its strong branches withered
and fire consumed them.
13 Now it is planted in the desert,
in a dry and thirsty land.
14 Fire spread from one of its main[d] branches
and consumed its fruit.
No strong branch is left on it
fit for a ruler’s scepter.’
“This is a lament and is to be used as a lament.”(Ezek. 19:1-14).

It is abundantly clear that God shares in the grief and lamentations of His captured and disgraced people. How He longs to restore them to the land and a right relationship with Him!

Hebrews 13

The concluding words of the writer of Hebrews are compelling and memorable. The writer reminds the Hebrew Christians to: 1) continue to love each other; 2) show hospitality- you may be "entertaining angels"; 3) visit those in prison- treat them as if you were there with them (many times imprisoned for their testimony); 4) keep marriage pure; 5) avoid the love of money; 6) be content with what you have; and 7) avoid "strange teachings"- remembering the truth of the Gospel and not the distortions that me sometimes introduce into it: *"Keep on loving one another as brothers and sisters. 2 Do not forget to show hospitality to strangers, for by so doing some people have shown hospitality to angels without knowing it. 3 Continue to remember those in prison as if you were together with them in prison, and those who are mistreated as if you yourselves were suffering.*

4 Marriage should be honored by all, and the marriage bed kept pure, for God will judge the adulterer and all the sexually immoral. 5 Keep your lives free from the love of money and be content with what you have, because God has said,

"Never will I leave you;
never will I forsake you."
6 So we say with confidence,

"The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid.
What can mere mortals do to me?"
7 Remember your leaders, who spoke the word of God to you. Consider the outcome of their way of life and imitate their faith. 8 Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever.

9 Do not be carried away by all kinds of strange teachings. It is good for our hearts to be strengthened by grace, not by eating ceremonial foods, which is of no benefit to those who do so. 10 We have an altar from which those who minister at the tabernacle have no right to eat." (Heb. 13:1-10)

We are reminded that God honors and is pleased with our "sacrifice of praise". We are also told to respect those in authority (which I find exceedingly difficult to do!), and to constantly offer intercessory prayer for the body of Christ in all its forms and functions: *"Through Jesus, therefore, let us continually offer to God a sacrifice of praise—the fruit of lips that openly profess his name. 16 And do not forget to do good and to share with others, for with such sacrifices God is pleased.*
17 Have confidence in your leaders and submit to their authority, because they keep watch over you as those who must give an account. Do this so that their work will be a joy, not a burden, for that would be of no benefit to you.
18 Pray for us. We are sure that we have a clear conscience and desire to live honorably in every way. 19 I particularly urge you to pray so that I may be restored to you soon." (Heb. 13:15-19)

The writer of this letter then offers a final benediction to those whom he has addressed in this letter, reminding them that Timothy is returning to them, and that "those from Italy" (presumably in the churches in Rome and elsewhere) greet them:

“Now may the God of peace, who through the blood of the eternal covenant brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus, that great Shepherd of the sheep, 21 equip you with everything good for doing his will, and may he work in us what is pleasing to him, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen.

22 Brothers and sisters, I urge you to bear with my word of exhortation, for in fact I have written to you quite briefly.

23 I want you to know that our brother Timothy has been released. If he arrives soon, I will come with him to see you.

24 Greet all your leaders and all the Lord’s people. Those from Italy send you their greetings.

25 Grace be with you all.” (Heb. 13:20-25)

Ezekiel 20-21 November 19, 2014 James 1

Finally some of the leadership of the exiled people of Judah dared to approach Ezekiel and ask him for a “Word” from the Lord. It is fascinating that many of them had spent so much of their lives refusing to honor God, to give Him deference, worship and praise, and now at least acted like they were interested in what God had to say. No wonder God was so angry! Why should God believe their motives were sincere- in His eyes they probably were seeking an escape or end to their judgment and punishment. God replies to the in strong words of reminder and condemnation for their many acts of unfaithfulness: *“In the seventh year, in the fifth month on the tenth day, some of the elders of Israel came to inquire of the Lord, and they sat down in front of me. 2 Then the word of the Lord came to me: 3 “Son of man, speak to the elders of Israel and say to them, ‘This is what the Sovereign Lord says: Have you come to inquire of me? As surely as I live, I will not let you inquire of me, declares the Sovereign Lord.’ 4 “Will you judge them? Will you judge them, son of man? Then confront them with the detestable practices of their ancestors 5 and say to them: ‘This is what the Sovereign Lord says: On the day I chose Israel, I swore with uplifted hand to the descendants of Jacob and revealed myself to them in Egypt. With uplifted hand I said to them, “I am the Lord your God.” 6 On that day I swore to them that I would bring them out of Egypt into a land I had searched out for them, a land flowing with milk and honey, the most beautiful of all lands. 7 And I said to them, “Each of you, get rid of the vile images you have set your eyes on, and do not defile yourselves with the idols of Egypt. I am the Lord your God.” 8 “‘But they rebelled against me and would not listen to me; they did not get rid of the vile images they had set their eyes on, nor did they forsake the idols of Egypt. So I said I would pour out my wrath on them and spend my anger against them in Egypt. 9 But for the sake of my name, I brought them out of Egypt. I did it to keep my name from being profaned in the eyes of the nations among whom they lived and in whose sight I had revealed myself to the Israelites. 10 Therefore I led them out of Egypt and brought them into the wilderness. 11 I gave them my decrees and made known to them my laws, by which the person who obeys them will live. 12 Also I gave them my Sabbaths as a sign between us, so they would know that I the Lord made them holy. 13 “‘Yet the people of Israel rebelled against me in the wilderness. They did not follow my decrees but rejected my laws—by*

which the person who obeys them will live—and they utterly desecrated my Sabbaths. So I said I would pour out my wrath on them and destroy them in the wilderness. 14 But for the sake of my name I did what would keep it from being profaned in the eyes of the nations in whose sight I had brought them out. 15 Also with uplifted hand I swore to them in the wilderness that I would not bring them into the land I had given them—a land flowing with milk and honey, the most beautiful of all lands— 16 because they rejected my laws and did not follow my decrees and desecrated my Sabbaths. For their hearts were devoted to their idols. 17 Yet I looked on them with pity and did not destroy them or put an end to them in the wilderness. 18 I said to their children in the wilderness, "Do not follow the statutes of your parents or keep their laws or defile yourselves with their idols. 19 I am the Lord your God; follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws. 20 Keep my Sabbaths holy, that they may be a sign between us. Then you will know that I am the Lord your God." (Ezek. 20:1-20) God spared their lives "for the sake of His Name" (verse 14) even though they had acted in a disgusting and disobedient way.

God then offers hope for the redemption and reclamation of His people: *"'As for you, people of Israel, this is what the Sovereign Lord says: Go and serve your idols, every one of you! But afterward you will surely listen to me and no longer profane my holy name with your gifts and idols. 40 For on my holy mountain, the high mountain of Israel, declares the Sovereign Lord, there in the land all the people of Israel will serve me, and there I will accept them. There I will require your offerings and your choice gifts,[b] along with all your holy sacrifices. 41 I will accept you as fragrant incense when I bring you out from the nations and gather you from the countries where you have been scattered, and I will be proved holy through you in the sight of the nations. 42 Then you will know that I am the Lord, when I bring you into the land of Israel, the land I had sworn with uplifted hand to give to your ancestors. 43 There you will remember your conduct and all the actions by which you have defiled yourselves, and you will loathe yourselves for all the evil you have done. 44 You will know that I am the Lord, when I deal with you for my name's sake and not according to your evil ways and your corrupt practices, you people of Israel, declares the Sovereign Lord.'"* (Ezek. 20:39-44) When the people have returned from exile, and start worshipping and honoring God as they should, then they will know that God truly is the Lord- and He will deal with them once again for "His Names' sake" in mercy and forgiveness- and call them again to be the light to the nations and the Gentiles (Isaiah 49:6; *"He (God) says: "It is too small a thing for you to be my servant to restore the tribes of Jacob and bring back those of Israel I have kept. I will also make you a light for the Gentiles, that my salvation may reach to the ends of the earth."*) (also Luke 2:32 *"a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and the glory of your people Israel."*).

Once again God describes the coming judgment of Jerusalem. In a long poetic passage He makes clear that the fate of Jerusalem is the sword- in particular, the sword of the conquering Babylonians:

"The word of the Lord came to me: 2 "Son of man, set your face against Jerusalem and preach against the sanctuary. Prophesy against the land of Israel 3 and say to her: 'This is what the Lord says: I am against you. I will draw my sword from its sheath and cut off from you both the righteous and the wicked. 4 Because I am going to cut off the righteous and the wicked, my sword will be unsheathed against

everyone from south to north. 5 Then all people will know that I the Lord have drawn my sword from its sheath; it will not return again.'

6 "Therefore groan, son of man! Groan before them with broken heart and bitter grief. 7 And when they ask you, 'Why are you groaning?' you shall say, 'Because of the news that is coming. Every heart will melt with fear and every hand go limp; every spirit will become faint and every leg will be wet with urine.' It is coming! It will surely take place, declares the Sovereign Lord."

8 The word of the Lord came to me: 9 "Son of man, prophesy and say, 'This is what the Lord says:
"'A sword, a sword,
sharpened and polished—
10
sharpened for the slaughter,
polished to flash like lightning!
"'Shall we rejoice in the scepter of my royal son? The sword despises every such stick.
11
"'The sword is appointed to be polished,
to be grasped with the hand;
it is sharpened and polished,
made ready for the hand of the slayer.
12
Cry out and wail, son of man,
for it is against my people;
it is against all the princes of Israel.
They are thrown to the sword
along with my people.
Therefore beat your breast.
13 "'Testing will surely come. And what if even the scepter, which the sword despises, does not continue? declares the Sovereign Lord.' (Ezek. 21:1-13)

God again explains the reason for His judgement and punishment- the rebellion of the people:
"Therefore this is what the Sovereign Lord says: 'Because you people have brought to mind your guilt by your open rebellion, revealing your sins in all that you do—because you have done this, you will be taken captive.

25 "'You profane and wicked prince of Israel, whose day has come, whose time of punishment has reached its climax, 26 this is what the Sovereign Lord says: Take off the turban, remove the crown. It will not be as it was: The lowly will be exalted and the exalted will be brought low. 27 A ruin! A ruin! I will make it a ruin! The crown will not be restored until he to whom it rightfully belongs shall come; to him I will give it.' (Ezek. 21:24-27). If we look carefully at verse 27, we see a prophesy about the One to whom the crown rightfully belongs- the Lord and King Jesus Himself! So there is a strand of hope, a bit of promise, mercy and restoration amidst the grim times and rebellios behavior of God's own people- whom He chose and with whom He established a lasting covenant! Therer will, however, be a long wait before this

prophecy id fulfilled! More than 500 years will pass before the birth of Jesus (593-565 BC to 3 AD).

And lest the evil nations that surrounded Israel be too smug about the fate and punishment of their neighbor, God then declares His judgment on the Ammonites:
"And you, son of man, prophesy and say, 'This is what the Sovereign Lord says about the Ammonites and their insults:
"'A sword, a sword,
drawn for the slaughter,
polished to consume
and to flash like lightning!
29
Despite false visions concerning you
and lying divinations about you,
it will be laid on the necks
of the wicked who are to be slain,
whose day has come,
whose time of punishment has reached its climax.
30
"'Let the sword return to its sheath.
In the place where you were created,
in the land of your ancestry,
I will judge you.
31
I will pour out my wrath on you
and breathe out my fiery anger against you;
I will deliver you into the hands of brutal men,
men skilled in destruction.
32
You will be fuel for the fire,
your blood will be shed in your land,
you will be remembered no more;
for I the Lord have spoken.'" (Ezek. 21:28-32)

James 1

James, by church tradition, ws an elder in the church at Jerusalem, and the biological brother (or half brother) to the Lord Jesus. How hard it must have been for James to come to the realization that his very brother was the Messiah that the Jews had sough for centuries! His examples of practical piety are enormously useful to us today. Some critics claim that James is a proponent of "works righteousness"- that is, that we can (or could) inherit the Kingdom by amassing good works. James never makes this claim- instead he focuses on the practical evidences and outgrowths of a grateful, joyful and forgiven heart. James is a great believer in prayer, and earned the reputation as "camel knees" since he was so often kneeling in prayer (https://www.biblegateway.com/resources/all-men-bible/James).

James starts his “general letter” addressed to the “twelve tribes” of Israel- scattered among the nations, with a simple pronouncement: *“James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ,*
To the twelve tribes scattered among the nations: Greetings” (James 1:1). Notice the simplicity and humility- James does not claim any “special status” as the Lord’s brother- instead he identifies himself as a “servant of God and the Lord Jesus Christ”

Consider it “joy” when you face troubles, James explains to us. What could be further from the “natural reaction of human nature” than this? We naturally seek pleasure, avoidance of pain, and the easy path. If we had our way, we might also be wealthy and in a position of influence and power! What James is telling us is that trials lead us closer to God- we realize our total dependence on Him for everything- and He deepens our spirits and broadens our understanding of His ways. This is a reason to be “joyful”: *“Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds, 3 because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance. 4 Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything. 5 If any of you lacks wisdom, you should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to you. 6 But when you ask, you must believe and not doubt, because the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind. 7 That person should not expect to receive anything from the Lord. 8 Such a person is double-minded and unstable in all they do.”* (James 1:2-8). We can certainly remmeber the great prayer of Solomon when he asked God for wisdom! (2 Chron. 1:8-10) God was certainly pleased to hear that petition, and responded generously.

One of the great obstacles to living a life of faithful obedience is unbelief or doubt. When we “ask” God for something or about something. We should do so in an attitude of belief and submission- not seeking Him to bless “our way” or “our ideas”. A person who constantly doubts and does not trust is regarded as a “double mided” person (verse 8).

The watchword is “perseverance under trial”- this perseverance comes from the gift of the Holy Spirit from God to us: *“Blessed is the one who perseveres under trial because, having stood the test, that person will receive the crown of life that the Lord has promised to those who love him.”* (James 1:12)

And what of temptation? We know that temptation is not sin, for Jesus was tempted at every point but did not sin (Hebrews 4:15). We cannot “blame” God for temptation. He does not tempt us- but He allows us to put ourselves in positions and places where temptation exists- and most of the time we already know from past experience that temptation exists. We have no one to blame but ourselves and our own poor choices for “being” in temptation. James advises us: *“When tempted, no one should say, “God is tempting me.” For God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does he tempt anyone; 14 but each person is tempted when they are dragged away by their own evil desire and enticed. 15 Then, after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, gives birth to death. 16 Don’t be deceived, my dear brothers and sisters. 17 Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows. 18 He chose to give us birth through the word of truth, that we might be a kind of firstfruits of all he created.”* (James 1:13-18) We must always

remember the great truth that Paul gave to the Corintian church in his first letter to them: *“No temptation has overtaken you except what is common to mankind. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can endure it.”* (1 Cor. 10:13)

James then gives us some very pratical and helpful advice: 1) be slow to speak and slow to anger; 2) listen- you may learn something; 3) be “doers” of the Word and not just “hearers” of the Word: *“My dear brothers and sisters, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry, 20 because human anger does not produce the righteousness that God desires. 21 Therefore, get rid of all moral filth and the evil that is so prevalent and humbly accept the word planted in you, which can save you.*

22 Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says. 23 Anyone who listens to the word but does not do what it says is like someone who looks at his face in a mirror 24 and, after looking at himself, goes away and immediately forgets what he looks like. 25 But whoever looks intently into the perfect law that gives freedom, and continues in it—not forgetting what they have heard, but doing it—they will be blessed in what they do.” (James 1:19-25) James has caught some unjustified criticism for this and similar passages when he emphasizes uur practical obedience to God. But we must look carefully at what James actually says- he states we should be doers of the Word, but then says we must also “listen to the Word”. The listening- and the hearing- and the faith that results allows the application of the Holy Spirit to our lives (remember that “faith comes by hearing” (Rom. 10:17) should- and will- lead us to action. We cannot help but respond to the love we have received from the Father through the Son! I don’t think for an instant that James is saying that we are saved by “works”- he is saying that our works will flow naturally from our faith.

Then James gives us more “practical” advice for our daily walk with the Lord: 1) we should guard our tongue (James deals with this again later); and 2) we should be diligent to care for the helpless and powerless among us, and 3) we should avoid the “pollution” of the world: *“Those who consider themselves religious and yet do not keep a tight rein on their tongues deceive themselves, and their religion is worthless. 27 Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world.”* (James 1:26-27)

http://dailyps.wordpress.com/2013/04/08/ps-let-perseverance-finish-its-work-so-that-you-may-be-mature-and-complete-not-lacking-anything/

Ezekiel 22-23 November 20, 2014 James 2

God then condemns Jerusalem, once the center of true worship anfd faithfulness to God, fore her idolatry: *The word of the Lord came to me: 2 "Son of man, will you judge her? Will you judge this city of bloodshed? Then confront her with all her detestable practices 3 and say: 'This is what the Sovereign Lord says: You city that brings on herself doom by shedding blood in her midst and defiles herself by making idols, 4 you have become guilty because of the blood you have shed and have become defiled by the idols you have made. You have brought your days to a close, and the end of your years has come. Therefore I will make you an object of scorn to the nations and a laughingstock to all the countries. 5 Those who are near and those who are far away will mock you, you infamous city, full of turmoil."* (Ezek. 22:1-5)

The leaders of the people are described as "dross" in the furnace, because of their corruption, treachery, and failure to lead the people into righteousness. They accept bribes, desecrate holy things, and perform detestable acts that offend God: *"'See how each of the princes of Israel who are in you uses his power to shed blood. 7 In you they have treated father and mother with contempt; in you they have oppressed the foreigner and mistreated the fatherless and the widow. 8 You have despised my holy things and desecrated my Sabbaths. 9 In you are slanderers who are bent on shedding blood; in you are those who eat at the mountain shrines and commit lewd acts. 10 In you are those who dishonor their father's bed; in you are those who violate women during their period, when they are ceremonially unclean. 11 In you one man commits a detestable offense with his neighbor's wife, another shamefully defiles his daughter-in-law, and another violates his sister, his own father's daughter. 12 In you are people who accept bribes to shed blood; you take interest and make a profit from the poor. You extort unjust gain from your neighbors. And you have forgotten me, declares the Sovereign Lord."* (Ezek. 22:6-12).

The “dross” in the silve refiner’s furnace was the “base metal”- the impurities left behind when the precious metals silver was refined (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dross). These metals are removed and disposed of as “trash” when the precious metals are purified. God uses this vivid image to describe the leadership of Jerusalem- they should have been precious and valuable and useful to God, instead their acts showed them to be useless: *“Then the word of the Lord came to me: 18 “Son of man, the people of Israel have become dross to me; all of them are the copper, tin, iron and lead left inside a furnace. They are but the dross of silver. 19 Therefore this is what the Sovereign Lord says: ‘Because you have all become dross, I will gather you into Jerusalem. 20 As silver, copper, iron, lead and tin are gathered into a furnace to be melted with a fiery blast, so will I gather you in my anger and my wrath and put you inside the city and melt you. 21 I will gather you and I will blow on you with my fiery wrath, and you will be melted inside her. 22 As silver is melted in a furnace, so you will be melted inside her, and you will know that I the Lord have poured out my wrath on you.’”* (Ezek. 22:17-22)

These leaders could have been the ones to “stand in the gap” of the walls for God, to protect and defend the people and support and be a blessing to God and to the people. Instead, God found all of them lacking and discarded them in His righteous wrath: *“I looked for someone among them who would build up the wall and stand before me in the gap on behalf of the land so I would not have to destroy it, but I found no one. 31 So I will pour out my wrath on them and consume them with my fiery anger, bringing down on their own heads all they have done, declares the Sovereign Lord.”*(Ezek. 22:30-31)

God then compares Judah and Samariah to two sisters who both became prostitutes, abandoning all decency to lust after and chase their lovers. *“The word of the Lord came to me: 2 “Son of man, there were two women, daughters of the same mother. 3 They became prostitutes in Egypt, engaging in prostitution from their youth. In that land their breasts were fondled and their virgin bosoms caressed. 4 The older was named Oholah, and her sister was Oholibah. They were mine and gave birth to sons and daughters. Oholah is Samaria, and Oholibah is Jerusalem.”* (Ezek. 23:1-4) The names, as would be expected, were not randomly chosen, but are used by God to illustrate their character and personality: “There is a pun in these names in the Hebrew. Oholah means "her tent", and Oholibah means "my tent is in her". Ezekiel's rhetoric portrays Oholah and Oholibah, or Samaria and Jerusalem, as the daughters of one mother. Both are said to be "brides of God", and both are guilty of idolatry and of religious and political alliances with Gentile nations. These kingdoms are described as prostitutes and adulteresses, given up to the abominations and idolatries of the Egyptians and Assyrians. Because of Oholah's crimes, she was carried away captive, and ceased to be a kingdom. (Comp. Psalm 78:67-69; 1 Kings 12:25-33; 2 Chr 11:13-16.) (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Oholah_and_Oholibah).

Those who think the Scriptures are not realistic in portrayal of human behavior should avoid these passages. The sexual sins of these two sisters are presented in graphic detail. Oholah (Samaria) is presented as a lustful prostitute, but Oholibah (Jerusalem) is even more depraved: *“Her sister Oholibah saw this, yet in her lust and prostitution she was more depraved than her sister. 12 She too lusted after the Assyrians—governors and commanders, warriors in full dress, mounted horsemen,*

all handsome young men. 13 I saw that she too defiled herself; both of them went the same way.

14 "But she carried her prostitution still further. She saw men portrayed on a wall, figures of Chaldeans portrayed in red, 15 with belts around their waists and flowing turbans on their heads; all of them looked like Babylonian chariot officers, natives of Chaldea. 16 As soon as she saw them, she lusted after them and sent messengers to them in Chaldea. 17 Then the Babylonians came to her, to the bed of love, and in their lust they defiled her. After she had been defiled by them, she turned away from them in disgust. 18 When she carried on her prostitution openly and exposed her naked body, I turned away from her in disgust, just as I had turned away from her sister. 19 Yet she became more and more promiscuous as she recalled the days of her youth, when she was a prostitute in Egypt. 20 There she lusted after her lovers, whose genitals were like those of donkeys and whose emission was like that of horses. 21 So you longed for the lewdness of your youth, when in Egypt your bosom was caressed and your young breasts fondled." (Ezek. 23:11-21). The term Chaldeans here refers to the Babylonians (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chaldean)

God's anger is clear, and the punishment for this unspeakable idolatry is to come swiftly and unmistakeably from Him: *"For this is what the Sovereign Lord says: I am about to deliver you into the hands of those you hate, to those you turned away from in disgust. 29 They will deal with you in hatred and take away everything you have worked for. They will leave you stark naked, and the shame of your prostitution will be exposed. Your lewdness and promiscuity 30 have brought this on you, because you lusted after the nations and defiled yourself with their idols. 31 You have gone the way of your sister; so I will put her cup into your hand.*

32 "This is what the Sovereign Lord says:

"You will drink your sister's cup,
a cup large and deep;
it will bring scorn and derision,
for it holds so much.
33 You will be filled with drunkenness and sorrow,
the cup of ruin and desolation,
the cup of your sister Samaria.
34 You will drink it and drain it dry
and chew on its pieces—
and you will tear your breasts.
I have spoken, declares the Sovereign Lord.

35 "Therefore this is what the Sovereign Lord says: Since you have forgotten me and turned your back on me, you must bear the consequences of your lewdness and prostitution." (Ezek. 23:28-35)

God's anger is so fierce and intense that He is willing to destroy at least some of the people, in an effort to rid the land (and the remaining faithful) of this ubiquitous idolatry: *"The Lord said to me: "Son of man, will you judge Oholah and Oholibah? Then confront them with their detestable practices, 37 for they have committed adultery and blood is on their hands. They committed adultery with their idols; they*

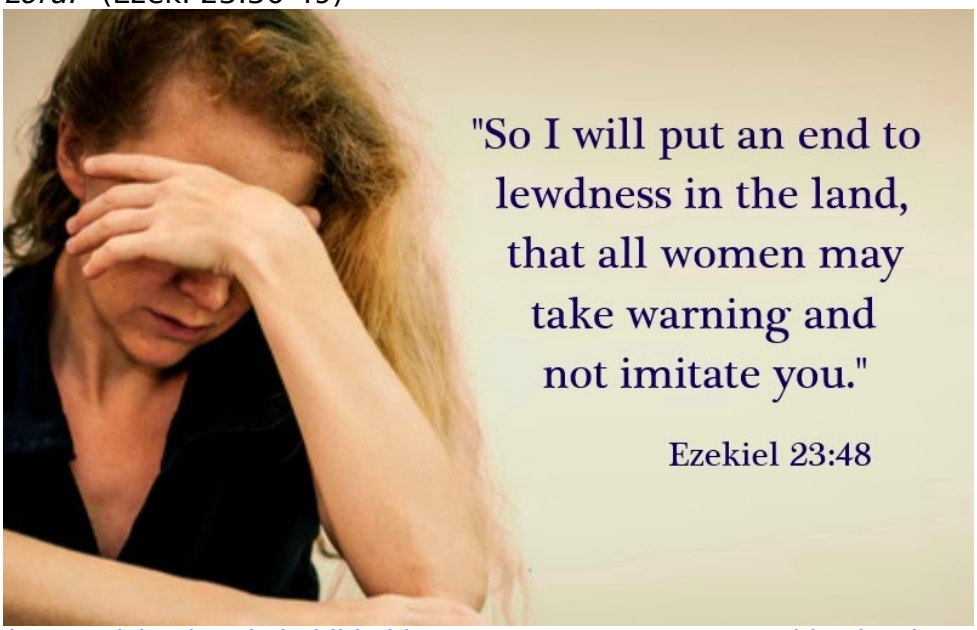
even sacrificed their children, whom they bore to me, as food for them. 38 They have also done this to me: At that same time they defiled my sanctuary and desecrated my Sabbaths. 39 On the very day they sacrificed their children to their idols, they entered my sanctuary and desecrated it. That is what they did in my house.

40 “They even sent messengers for men who came from far away, and when they arrived you bathed yourself for them, applied eye makeup and put on your jewelry. 41 You sat on an elegant couch, with a table spread before it on which you had placed the incense and olive oil that belonged to me.

42 “The noise of a carefree crowd was around her; drunkards were brought from the desert along with men from the rabble, and they put bracelets on the wrists of the woman and her sister and beautiful crowns on their heads. 43 Then I said about the one worn out by adultery, ‘Now let them use her as a prostitute, for that is all she is.’ 44 And they slept with her. As men sleep with a prostitute, so they slept with those lewd women, Oholah and Oholibah. 45 But righteous judges will sentence them to the punishment of women who commit adultery and shed blood, because they are adulterous and blood is on their hands.

46 “This is what the Sovereign Lord says: Bring a mob against them and give them over to terror and plunder. 47 The mob will stone them and cut them down with their swords; they will kill their sons and daughters and burn down their houses.

48 “So I will put an end to lewdness in the land, that all women may take warning and not imitate you. 49 You will suffer the penalty for your lewdness and bear the consequences of your sins of idolatry. Then you will know that I am the Sovereign Lord.” (Ezek. 23:36-49)



http://michaelreadsthebible.blogspot.com/2014_07_01_archive.html

James 2

Showing favoritism in the church leads to many undesirable outcomes: 1) loss of unity in the body; 2) decision making may be influenced by the wealthy, the "beautiful" or influential; 3) the witness of the church is compromised- certainly at the point of "loving a neighbor"- which includes all neighbors, as Jesus powerfully illustrated in the parable of the Goos Samaritan. James' words are: *"My brothers and sisters, believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ must not show favoritism. 2 Suppose a man comes into your meeting wearing a gold ring and fine clothes, and a poor man in filthy old clothes also comes in. 3 If you show special attention to the man wearing fine clothes and say, "Here's a good seat for you," but say to the poor man, "You stand there" or "Sit on the floor by my feet," 4 have you not discriminated among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts?*

5 Listen, my dear brothers and sisters: Has not God chosen those who are poor in the eyes of the world to be rich in faith and to inherit the kingdom he promised those who love him? 6 But you have dishonored the poor. Is it not the rich who are exploiting you? Are they not the ones who are dragging you into court? 7 Are they not the ones who are blaspheming the noble name of him to whom you belong?

8 If you really keep the royal law found in Scripture, "Love your neighbor as yourself," you are doing right. 9 But if you show favoritism, you sin and are convicted by the law as lawbreakers. 10 For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it. 11 For he who said, "You shall not commit adultery," also said, "You shall not murder." If you do not commit adultery but do commit murder, you have become a lawbreaker.

12 Speak and act as those who are going to be judged by the law that gives freedom, 13 because judgment without mercy will be shown to anyone who has not been merciful. Mercy triumphs over judgment." (James 2:1-13)

We then revisit the issue of "good deeds". James holds these as central to the vitality of faith. What James is NOT saying is that salvation can be earned. What he is warning us about is the "dead faith"- actually the lack of true faith- in many who claim the name of Christian. There are false Christians who have the "appearance of righteousness" and many times "say the right thinhg" and have extensive knowledge of the Scriptures" but have never surrendered their will to God and asked for forgiveness and salvation which only comes from the Son. It is these "false believers" that James is warning us about. He might have added that the Lord said to us that we could not judge a person's heart, but that we would know them "by their fruit" (Matthew 7:16 *"By their fruit you will recognize them. Do people pick grapes from thornbushes, or figs from thistles?"* James tells us: *"What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if someone claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save them? 15 Suppose a brother or a sister is without clothes and daily food. 16 If one of you says to them, "Go in peace; keep warm and well fed," but does nothing about their physical needs, what good is it? 17 In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead.*

18 But someone will say, "You have faith; I have deeds."

Show me your faith without deeds, and I will show you my faith by my deeds. 19 You believe that there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe that—and shudder.

20 You foolish person, do you want evidence that faith without deeds is useless[d]? 21 Was not our father Abraham considered righteous for what he did when he offered his son Isaac on the altar? 22 You see that his faith and his actions were working together, and his faith was made complete by what he did. 23 And the scripture was fulfilled that says, "Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness," and he was called God's friend. 24 You see that a person is considered righteous by what they do and not by faith alone." (James 2:14-24) The example here is striking- Abraham (then Abram) did not have "faith" in God that was merely intellectual agreement with truth, his faith was from the converted and believeing heart- and his faith showed itself repeatedly in actions which flow from faith!

The Rahab is held up as an example of "doing the right thing". She certainly was not of impeccable moral character, but God used her faith to accomplish a great thing- the conquering of Jerusalem by His people. *"In the same way, was not even Rahab the prostitute considered righteous for what she did when she gave lodging to the spies and sent them off in a different direction? 26 As the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without deeds is dead."* (James 2:25-26)

Ezekiel 24-26 November 21, 2014 James 3

More graphic lessons- first a cook pot filled with boiled meat, then the death of Ezekiel's wife. Both of these are illustrations of the state Jersulem/Judah was in in the eyes of the Lord their God. He tells Ezekiel: *"'For this is what the Sovereign Lord says:*

"'Woe to the city of bloodshed,
to the pot now encrusted,
whose deposit will not go away!
Take the meat out piece by piece
in whatever order it comes.
7 "'For the blood she shed is in her midst:
She poured it on the bare rock;
she did not pour it on the ground,
where the dust would cover it.
8 To stir up wrath and take revenge
I put her blood on the bare rock,
so that it would not be covered.
9 "'Therefore this is what the Sovereign Lord says:

"'Woe to the city of bloodshed!
I, too, will pile the wood high.
10 So heap on the wood
and kindle the fire.
Cook the meat well,
mixing in the spices;
and let the bones be charred.
11 Then set the empty pot on the coals
till it becomes hot and its copper glows,

so that its impurities may be melted
and its deposit burned away.
12 It has frustrated all efforts;
its heavy deposit has not been removed,
not even by fire." (Ezekiel 24:1-12)

And the Lord explains the reasons for His seemingly harsh actions: *"'Now your impurity is lewdness. Because I tried to cleanse you but you would not be cleansed from your impurity, you will not be clean again until my wrath against you has subsided.*

14 "'I the Lord have spoken. The time has come for me to act. I will not hold back; I will not have pity, nor will I relent. You will be judged according to your conduct and your actions, declares the Sovereign Lord.'" (Ezek. 24:13-14). I am so delighted that I am not judged only according to my conduct and actions- for I have failed my Lord miserable so many times!

God then allows Ezekiel's wife, whom he apparently treasured and loved, to die suddenly. Ezekiel is told not to mourn, to present himself to the outside world as one unaffected by the searing loss. God is showing Ezekiel how He sees the people- they have lost their first love and act as if there were no real loss: The word of the Lord came to me: *"Son of man, with one blow I am about to take away from you the delight of your eyes. Yet do not lament or weep or shed any tears. 17 Groan quietly; do not mourn for the dead. Keep your turban fastened and your sandals on your feet; do not cover your mustache and beard or eat the customary food of mourners."*

18 So I spoke to the people in the morning, and in the evening my wife died. The next morning I did as I had been commanded.

19 Then the people asked me, "Won't you tell us what these things have to do with us? Why are you acting like this?"

20 So I said to them, "The word of the Lord came to me: 21 Say to the people of Israel, 'This is what the Sovereign Lord says: I am about to desecrate my sanctuary —the stronghold in which you take pride, the delight of your eyes, the object of your affection. The sons and daughters you left behind will fall by the sword. 22 And you will do as I have done. You will not cover your mustache and beard or eat the customary food of mourners. 23 You will keep your turbans on your heads and your sandals on your feet. You will not mourn or weep but will waste away because of[a] your sins and groan among yourselves. 24 Ezekiel will be a sign to you; you will do just as he has done. When this happens, you will know that I am the Sovereign Lord.'

25 "And you, son of man, on the day I take away their stronghold, their joy and glory, the delight of their eyes, their heart's desire, and their sons and daughters as well— 26 on that day a fugitive will come to tell you the news. 27 At that time your mouth will be opened; you will speak with him and will no longer be silent. So you will be a sign to them, and they will know that I am the Lord." (Ezek. 24:16-27)

Ezekile is to be a "sign to them"- an emblem of their reaction- or lack or reaction- to

their terrible loss. How far the people have fallen from what was once a loving and intimate relationship with their God, their first love.

God then pronounces judgment on Ammon, Moab, Edom. Philistia and Tyre- all tradtionla enemies of Judah's and all who have delighted in the misfortune of their neighbor Judah/Jerusalem. I am reminded of the outward "glee and delight" of some of the Isalmic faith at the news of the tragic attack on 9/11/2001. Surely God was not delighted with this rejoicing over the slaughter of nearly 3000 innocent people.

God has harsh words for Ammon: *"The word of the Lord came to me: 2 "Son of man, set your face against the Ammonites and prophesy against them. 3 Say to them, 'Hear the word of the Sovereign Lord. This is what the Sovereign Lord says: Because you said "Aha!" over my sanctuary when it was desecrated and over the land of Israel when it was laid waste and over the people of Judah when they went into exile, 4 therefore I am going to give you to the people of the East as a possession. They will set up their camps and pitch their tents among you; they will eat your fruit and drink your milk. 5 I will turn Rabbah into a pasture for camels and Ammon into a resting place for sheep. Then you will know that I am the Lord."* (Ezekiel 25:1-5)

God then judges Moab: "This is what the Sovereign Lord says: *'Because Moab and Seir said, "Look, Judah has become like all the other nations," 9 therefore I will expose the flank of Moab, beginning at its frontier towns—Beth Jeshimoth, Baal Meon and Kiriathaim—the glory of that land. 10 I will give Moab along with the Ammonites to the people of the East as a possession, so that the Ammonites will not be remembered among the nations; 11 and I will inflict punishment on Moab. Then they will know that I am the Lord.'"*(Ezek. 25:8-11).

Edom does not escape God's attention or judgment: *"This is what the Sovereign Lord says: 'Because Edom took revenge on Judah and became very guilty by doing so, 13 therefore this is what the Sovereign Lord says: I will stretch out my hand against Edom and kill both man and beast. I will lay it waste, and from Teman to Dedan they will fall by the sword. 14 I will take vengeance on Edom by the hand of my people Israel, and they will deal with Edom in accordance with my anger and my wrath; they will know my vengeance, declares the Sovereign Lord.'"* (Ezek. 25:12-14)

Philistia is to be punished as well: *"This is what the Sovereign Lord says: 'Because the Philistines acted in vengeance and took revenge with malice in their hearts, and with ancient hostility sought to destroy Judah, 16 therefore this is what the Sovereign Lord says: I am about to stretch out my hand against the Philistines, and I will wipe out the Kerethites and destroy those remaining along the coast. 17 I will carry out great vengeance on them and punish them in my wrath. Then they will know that I am the Lord, when I take vengeance on them.'"* (Ezek. 25:15-17)

An entire chapter of Ezekiel is dedicated to God's words of judgment against Tyre, the ancient and renowned city/state (http://biblehub.com/commentaries/ezekiel/26-14.htm): *"This is what the Sovereign Lord says: When I make you a desolate city, like cities no longer inhabited, and when I bring the ocean depths over you and its vast waters cover you, 20 then I will bring you down with those who go down to the pit, to the people of long ago. I will make you dwell in the earth below, as in ancient ruins, with those who go down to the pit, and you will not return or take your place[d] in the land of the living. 21 I will bring you to a horrible end and you will be no more. You will be sought, but you will never again be found, declares the Sovereign Lord."* (Ezekiel 26:19-21)

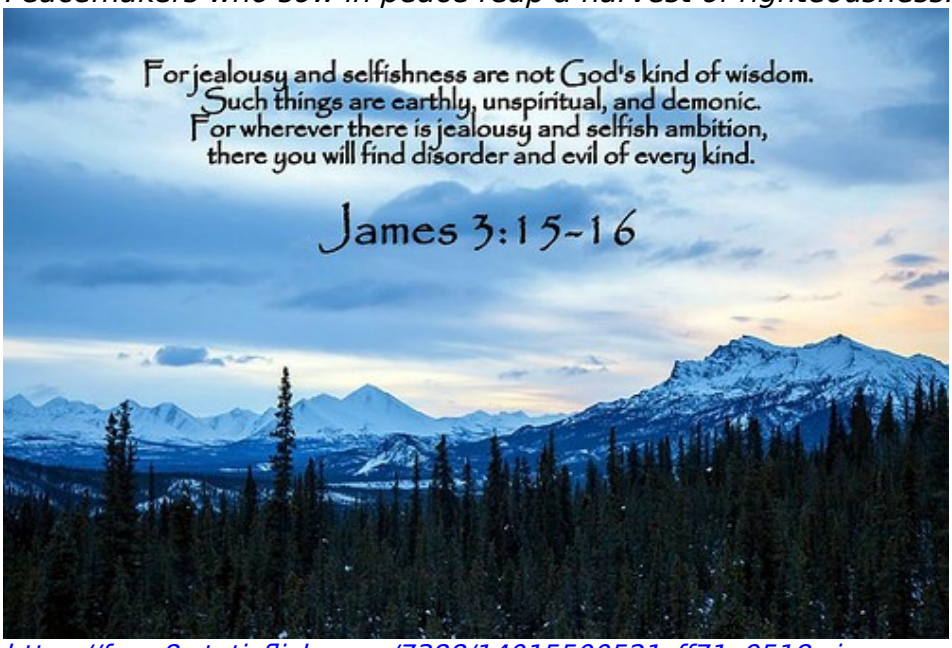
James 3

James 3 begins with a statement I have read and often shuddered at, primarily since I am convinced that one of my Spiritual gifts is in teaching- specifically teaching the Word. James comments: *"Not many of you should become teachers, my fellow believers, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly. 2 We all stumble in many ways. Anyone who is never at fault in what they say is perfect, able to keep their whole body in check."* (James 3:1-2) Judged more strictly? I don't like the sound (or the reality!) of that! Yet it is true that we are taught by the Lord that we are never to be a "cause for stumbling" (1 Cor. 10:32; Mark 9:42; Rom. 14:13). Many a vicotory has been won by Satan when one professing to be a teacher in the Word is exposed as a sinner, a charlatan, or simply a good "speaker" and better actor. It is very humbling to me to teach the Word- yet I feel that I must! May God have mercy on me for my shortcomings and the many times I have failed Him.

James then attacks on of the Christian believers' "favorite sins"- that of the misuse of the tongue. It is an "OK sin" to gossip (in the name of praying for others), to backbite, criticize the leaders and decisions in the church, or to belittle another. We also enjoy gluttony! "Nice folks" can get away with these "less important" sins- or so we sometimes think. Sin is serious to God- to rememdy it cost Him everything- His very Son! James corrects our impressions about the seriousness of sins of the tongue*: "When we put bits into the mouths of horses to make them obey us, we can turn the whole animal. 4 Or take ships as an example. Although they are so large and are driven by strong winds, they are steered by a very small rudder wherever the pilot wants to go. 5 Likewise, the tongue is a small part of the body, but it makes great boasts. Consider what a great forest is set on fire by a small spark. 6 The tongue also is a fire, a world of evil among the parts of the body. It corrupts the whole body, sets the whole course of one's life on fire, and is itself set on fire by hell.*
7 All kinds of animals, birds, reptiles and sea creatures are being tamed and have been tamed by mankind, 8 but no human being can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison.
9 With the tongue we praise our Lord and Father, and with it we curse human beings, who have been made in God's likeness. 10 Out of the same mouth come praise and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this should not be. 11 Can both fresh water and salt water flow from the same spring? 12 My brothers and sisters, can a fig tree bear olives, or a grapevine bear figs? Neither can a salt spring produce fresh water." (James 3:3-12)

He then describes two types of wisdom: 1) wisdom that is the fruit of a “good life”- one well- lived in the genuine love and service to the Lord; 2) false “wisdom” that is really self righteousness, that springs from an arrogance and a heart separated and unyielded to God. James tell us that we can discern which type of wisdom we are seeing by examining the results- the “fruits” of each type: *“Who is wise and understanding among you? Let them show it by their good life, by deeds done in the humility that comes from wisdom. 14 But if you harbor bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast about it or deny the truth. 15 Such “wisdom” does not come down from heaven but is earthly, unspiritual, demonic. 16 For where you have envy and selfish ambition, there you find disorder and every evil practice.*

17 But the wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure; then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere. 18 Peacemakers who sow in peace reap a harvest of righteousness.” (James 3:13-18)



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Ezekiel 27-28 November 22, 2014 James 4

Ezekiel 27 and 28 are centered on a lament over Tyre- both the city itself and the king/governor of this ancient center of commerce, trade and beauty. God is disgusted with the immorality and disobedience of these people anfd their leader, and has arranged a day of reckoning and punishment for them. The Scripture says: “The word of the Lord came to me: 2 “Son of man, take up a lament concerning Tyre. 3 Say to Tyre, situated at the gateway to the sea, merchant of peoples on many coasts, ‘This is what the Sovereign Lord says:

“‘You say, Tyre,
“I am perfect in beauty.”
4 Your domain was on the high seas;
your builders brought your beauty to perfection.
5 They made all your timbers

of juniper from Senir[a];
they took a cedar from Lebanon
to make a mast for you.
6 Of oaks from Bashan
they made your oars;
of cypress wood[b] from the coasts of Cyprus
they made your deck, adorned with ivory.
7 Fine embroidered linen from Egypt was your sail
and served as your banner;
your awnings were of blue and purple
from the coasts of Elishah.
8 Men of Sidon and Arvad were your oarsmen;
your skilled men, Tyre, were aboard as your sailors.” (Ezekiel 27:1-8).

The major and besetting sin of Tyre is the disobedience that comes from pride, self righteousness, and utter disregard for the wisdom and counsel of God. The arrogance of the selef decalred “beauty” and seeming perfection has blinded the people to their constant dependence on the grace and graciousness of God. Tough many have admired her, served her, and traded with her, she has sealed her own doom by ignoring the counsel and grace of the living God: “‘Harran, Kanneh and Eden and merchants of Sheba, Ashur and Kilmad traded with you. 24 In your marketplace they traded with you beautiful garments, blue fabric, embroidered work and multicolored rugs with cords twisted and tightly knotted.

25 “‘The ships of Tarshish serve
as carriers for your wares.
You are filled with heavy cargo
as you sail the sea.
26 Your oarsmen take you
out to the high seas.
But the east wind will break you to pieces
far out at sea.
27 Your wealth, merchandise and wares,
your mariners, sailors and shipwrights,
your merchants and all your soldiers,
and everyone else on board
will sink into the heart of the sea
on the day of your shipwreck.
28 The shorelands will quake
when your sailors cry out.
29 All who handle the oars
will abandon their ships;
the mariners and all the sailors
will stand on the shore.
30 They will raise their voice
and cry bitterly over you;
they will sprinkle dust on their heads
and roll in ashes.
31 They will shave their heads because of you
and will put on sackcloth.

They will weep over you with anguish of soul
and with bitter mourning.
32 As they wail and mourn over you,
they will take up a lament concerning you:
“Who was ever silenced like Tyre,
surrounded by the sea?”
33 When your merchandise went out on the seas,
you satisfied many nations;
with your great wealth and your wares
you enriched the kings of the earth.
34 Now you are shattered by the sea
in the depths of the waters;
your wares and all your company
have gone down with you.
35 All who live in the coastlands
are appalled at you;
their kings shudder with horror
and their faces are distorted with fear.
36 The merchants among the nations scoff at you;
you have come to a horrible end
and will be no more.’” (Ezekiel 27:23-36).

Then the focus turns to the king of Tyre himself. The overreaching pride and self glorification of this leader are a nearly pefect reflection of the sate of mind and spirit of this whole city/state. They have all neglected God, and arrogantly set their own self serving course. The punishment for this pride, however, will be swift and sure: The word of the Lord came to me: 2 “Son of man, say to the ruler of Tyre, ‘This is what the Sovereign Lord says:

“‘In the pride of your heart
you say, “I am a god;
I sit on the throne of a god
in the heart of the seas.”
But you are a mere mortal and not a god,
though you think you are as wise as a god.
3 Are you wiser than Daniel[a]?
Is no secret hidden from you?
4 By your wisdom and understanding
you have gained wealth for yourself
and amassed gold and silver
in your treasuries.
5 By your great skill in trading
you have increased your wealth,
and because of your wealth
your heart has grown proud.
6 “‘Therefore this is what the Sovereign Lord says:

“‘Because you think you are wise,
as wise as a god,
7 I am going to bring foreigners against you,

the most ruthless of nations;
they will draw their swords against your beauty and wisdom
and pierce your shining splendor.
8 They will bring you down to the pit,
and you will die a violent death
in the heart of the seas.” (Ezekile 28:1-8)

The imagery then changes. The prophecy given to Ezekiel about the king of Tyre reaches past this mere human and points to the fall of the Great Father of Lies, Satan/Lucifer himself: “The word of the Lord came to me: 12 “Son of man, take up a lament concerning the king of Tyre and say to him: ‘This is what the Sovereign Lord says:

“‘You were the seal of perfection,
full of wisdom and perfect in beauty.
13 You were in Eden,
the garden of God;
every precious stone adorned you:
carnelian, chrysolite and emerald,
topaz, onyx and jasper,
lapis lazuli, turquoise and beryl.
Your settings and mountings were made of gold;
on the day you were created they were prepared.
14 You were anointed as a guardian cherub,
for so I ordained you.
You were on the holy mount of God;
you walked among the fiery stones.
15 You were blameless in your ways
from the day you were created
till wickedness was found in you.
16 Through your widespread trade
you were filled with violence,
and you sinned.
So I drove you in disgrace from the mount of God,
and I expelled you, guardian cherub,
from among the fiery stones.
17 Your heart became proud
on account of your beauty,
and you corrupted your wisdom
because of your splendor.
So I threw you to the earth;
I made a spectacle of you before kings.
18 By your many sins and dishonest trade
you have desecrated your sanctuaries.
So I made a fire come out from you,
and it consumed you,
and I reduced you to ashes on the ground
in the sight of all who were watching.
19 All the nations who knew you
are appalled at you;

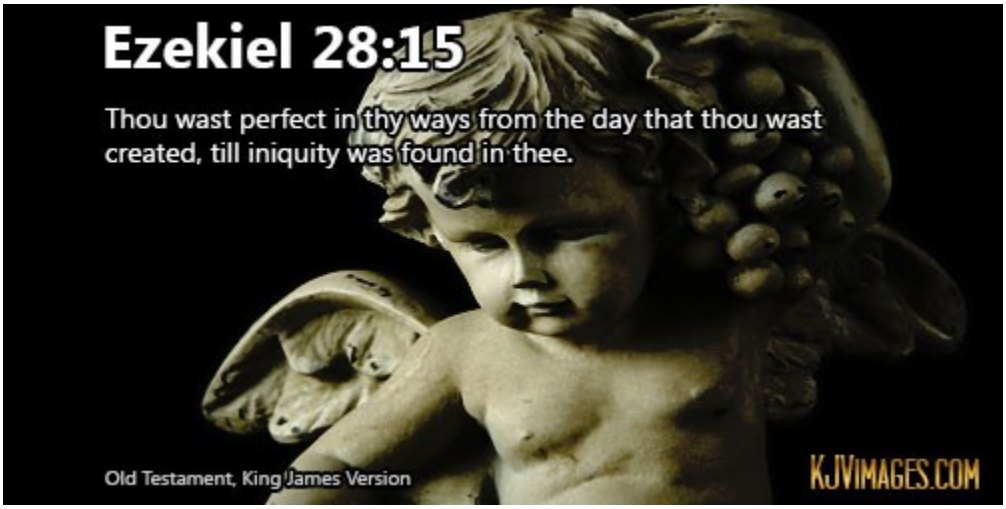
you have come to a horrible end
    and will be no more.’” (Ezekiel 28:12-19) Satan was a “lead angel” in high standing and admired by the angelic hosts, but “wickedness” was found in him (verse 15) and he and many rebellious angels were expelled from heaven (verse 16).

Ezekiel is then told to prophesy against Sidon: The word of the Lord came to me: 21 “Son of man, set your face against Sidon; prophesy against her 22 and say: ‘This is what the Sovereign Lord says:

“‘I am against you, Sidon,
    and among you I will display my glory.
You will know that I am the Lord,
    when I inflict punishment on you
    and within you am proved to be holy.
23 I will send a plague upon you
    and make blood flow in your streets.
The slain will fall within you,
    with the sword against you on every side.
Then you will know that I am the Lord.
24 “‘No longer will the people of Israel have malicious neighbors who are painful briers and sharp thorns. Then they will know that I am the Sovereign Lord.” (Ezekiel 28:21-24).

This chapter of Ezekiel ends with another glimmer of hope and promise for God’s people- once the punishment has been meted out, they will be restored and will once more inhabit the land: “‘This is what the Sovereign Lord says: When I gather the people of Israel from the nations where they have been scattered, I will be proved holy through them in the sight of the nations. Then they will live in their own land, which I gave to my servant Jacob. 26 They will live there in safety and will build houses and plant vineyards; they will live in safety when I inflict punishment on all their neighbors who maligned them. Then they will know that I am the Lord their God.’ (Ezekiel 28:25-26).

There is a problem here in terms of the historic and observable fulfilment of this prophesy. When the people returned from the Babylonian captivity, they did not return to anything near their former glory and influence. We must then look for a long term fulfilment of this prophecy to realize it fully- a fulfilment that is yet to come in history (see http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/History/Exile1.html).



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James 4

James was certainly a realist. He knew that the church is made up of real people with real problems, among these problems is division, anger and strife- and a selfish insistence on one's own way. He speaks to this and other practical and real life issues within the church: 1) dispites and quarrels within the body; 2) covetousness; 3) wrong –usually self serving- motives; 4) friendship with "the world"; and 5) pride. God's answer to all of these is the richness and abundance of His grace to us (verse 6). We are to submit to God, and let Him be in control of our lives, treasure, time and desires: "*What causes fights and quarrels among you? Don't they come from your desires that battle within you? 2 You desire but do not have, so you kill. You covet but you cannot get what you want, so you quarrel and fight. You do not have because you do not ask God. 3 When you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on your pleasures.*

4 You adulterous people, don't you know that friendship with the world means enmity against God? Therefore, anyone who chooses to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God. 5 Or do you think Scripture says without reason that he jealously longs for the spirit he has caused to dwell in us? 6 But he gives us more grace. That is why Scripture says:

"God opposes the proud
but shows favor to the humble."
7 Submit yourselves, then, to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. 8 Come near to God and he will come near to you. Wash your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded. 9 Grieve, mourn and wail. Change your laughter to mourning and your joy to gloom. 10 Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up." (James 4:1-10). The key is "humility" (verse 10) of which the Lord was a perfect example.

We are reminded not to judge or "slander" each other- only God has the wisdom and intelligence, as well as all the pertinent information, to be a judge- we are to abide by His judments: *"Brothers and sisters, do not slander one another. Anyone who speaks against a brother or sister or judges them speaks against the law and*

judges it. When you judge the law, you are not keeping it, but sitting in judgment on it. 12 There is only one Lawgiver and Judge, the one who is able to save and destroy. But you—who are you to judge your neighbor?” (James 4:11-12)
We are never to assume that our tomorrows are guaranteed- we have no promise of anything but the matchless grace and presence of the Lord. Anything beyond that is poresumption and sin: *“Now listen, you who say, “Today or tomorrow we will go to this or that city, spend a year there, carry on business and make money.” 14 Why, you do not even know what will happen tomorrow. What is your life? You are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes. 15 Instead, you ought to say, “If it is the Lord’s will, we will live and do this or that.” 16 As it is, you boast in your arrogant schemes. All such boasting is evil. 17 If anyone, then, knows the good they ought to do and doesn’t do it, it is sin for them.”* (James 4:13-17)

Ezekiel 29-31 November 23, 2014 James 5

Egypt does not escapr the wrath and judgment of God. In the next three chapters of Ezekiel, the specifics of God’s case against the Pharaoh and his country are given in detail*. “In the tenth year, in the tenth month on the twelfth day, the word of the Lord came to me: 2 “Son of man, set your face against Pharaoh king of Egypt and prophesy against him and against all Egypt. 3 Speak to him and say: ‘This is what the Sovereign Lord says:*

“‘I am against you, Pharaoh king of Egypt,
you great monster lying among your streams.
You say, “The Nile belongs to me;
I made it for myself.”
4 But I will put hooks in your jaws
and make the fish of your streams stick to your scales.
I will pull you out from among your streams,
with all the fish sticking to your scales.
5 I will leave you in the desert,
you and all the fish of your streams.
You will fall on the open field
and not be gathered or picked up.
I will give you as food
to the beasts of the earth and the birds of the sky.
6 Then all who live in Egypt will know that I am the Lord.” (Ezekiel 29:1-6a).

One of the main reasons that God is against Egypt is that His people depended on Egypt for strength and protection instrad of the Lord their God. Egypt was more than willing to help- for a price. God’s judgment is sure and righteous: *“‘You have been a staff of reed for the people of Israel. 7 When they grasped you with their hands, you splintered and you tore open their shoulders; when they leaned on you, you broke and their backs were wrenched.*

8 “‘Therefore this is what the Sovereign Lord says: I will bring a sword against you and kill both man and beast. 9 Egypt will become a desolate wasteland. Then they will know that I am the Lord.

“‘Because you said, “The Nile is mine; I made it,” 10 therefore I am against you and against your streams, and I will make the land of Egypt a ruin and a desolate waste from Migdol to Aswan, as far as the border of Cush. 11 The foot of neither man nor beast will pass through it; no one will live there for forty years. 12 I will make the land of Egypt desolate among devastated lands, and her cities will lie desolate forty years among ruined cities. And I will disperse the Egyptians among the nations and scatter them through the countries.

13 “‘Yet this is what the Sovereign Lord says: At the end of forty years I will gather the Egyptians from the nations where they were scattered. 14 I will bring them back from captivity and return them to Upper Egypt, the land of their ancestry. There they will be a lowly kingdom. 15 It will be the lowliest of kingdoms and will never again exalt itself above the other nations. I will make it so weak that it will never again rule over the nations. 16 Egypt will no longer be a source of confidence for the people of Israel but will be a reminder of their sin in turning to her for help. Then they will know that I am the Sovereign Lord.’” (Ezek. 29:6b-16). Because of Egypt’s treachery against Israel/Judah, God will reduce Egypt to a “lowly kingdom” (verse 14) that “wil never again rule over the nations” (verse 15).

The God’s attention turns to Nebuchadnezzar. The king of Babylon had gotten no rewrds for his campaign against Tyre, so God will reward him with the spoils of Egypy: *In the twenty-seventh year, in the first month on the first day, the word of the Lord came to me: 18 “Son of man, Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon drove his army in a hard campaign against Tyre; every head was rubbed bare and every shoulder made raw. Yet he and his army got no reward from the campaign he led against Tyre. 19 Therefore this is what the Sovereign Lord says: I am going to give Egypt to Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon, and he will carry off its wealth. He will loot and plunder the land as pay for his army. 20 I have given him Egypt as a reward for his efforts because he and his army did it for me, declares the Sovereign Lord.*

21 “On that day I will make a horn grow for the Israelites, and I will open your mouth among them. Then they will know that I am the Lord.”(Ezek. 29:17-21) Once again God uses pagan nations to accomplish His will.

God is neither pleased nor delighted to punish the nations, even those He does not have a covenant relationship with. His aim is to awaken them to repentance, to shock them out of their complacency and self-dependence to realize that they, like Israel, must depend on God for everything: *“The word of the Lord came to me: 2 “Son of man, prophesy and say: ‘This is what the Sovereign Lord says:*

“‘Wail and say,
“Alas for that day!”
3 For the day is near,
the day of the Lord is near—
a day of clouds,
a time of doom for the nations.
4 A sword will come against Egypt,
and anguish will come upon Cush.
When the slain fall in Egypt,
her wealth will be carried away
and her foundations torn down.

5 Cush and Libya, Lydia and all Arabia, Kub and the people of the covenant land will
fall by the sword along with Egypt.
6 “‘This is what the Lord says:
“‘The allies of Egypt will fall
and her proud strength will fail.
From Migdol to Aswan
they will fall by the sword within her,
declares the Sovereign Lord.
7 “‘They will be desolate
among desolate lands,
and their cities will lie
among ruined cities.
8 Then they will know that I am the Lord,
when I set fire to Egypt
and all her helpers are crushed.” (Ezek. 30:1-8).
God’s pur[ose is revealed in the next verse: *“‘On that day messengers will go out from me in ships to frighten Cush out of her complacency. Anguish will take hold of them on the day of Egypt’s doom, for it is sure to come.”* (Ezek. 30:9). God intends to “frighten Cush (Egypt) out of her complacency”, with the hope and intent of reclamation.

First, though, the detestable idols and false gods of Egypt must be destroyed: *“‘This is what the Sovereign Lord says:*

“‘I will destroy the idols
and put an end to the images in Memphis.
No longer will there be a prince in Egypt,
and I will spread fear throughout the land.
14 I will lay waste Upper Egypt,
set fire to Zoan
and inflict punishment on Thebes.
15 I will pour out my wrath on Pelusium,
the stronghold of Egypt,
and wipe out the hordes of Thebes.
16 I will set fire to Egypt;
Pelusium will writhe in agony.
Thebes will be taken by storm;
Memphis will be in constant distress.
17 The young men of Heliopolis and Bubastis
will fall by the sword,
and the cities themselves will go into captivity.
18 Dark will be the day at Tahpanhes
when I break the yoke of Egypt;
there her proud strength will come to an end.
She will be covered with clouds,
and her villages will go into captivity.
19 So I will inflict punishment on Egypt,
and they will know that I am the Lord.’” (Ezek. 30:13-19)

Symbolically, the arm of Pharaoh will be broken, and will not heal enough to use a sword. God will remove the capacity of Egypt to make war, and scatter the people of Egypt throughout the other nations, similar to the fate that will befall God's own people in the Diaspora: *"20 In the eleventh year, in the first month on the seventh day, the word of the Lord came to me: 21 "Son of man, I have broken the arm of Pharaoh king of Egypt. It has not been bound up to be healed or put in a splint so that it may become strong enough to hold a sword. 22 Therefore this is what the Sovereign Lord says: I am against Pharaoh king of Egypt. I will break both his arms, the good arm as well as the broken one, and make the sword fall from his hand. 23 I will disperse the Egyptians among the nations and scatter them through the countries. 24 I will strengthen the arms of the king of Babylon and put my sword in his hand, but I will break the arms of Pharaoh, and he will groan before him like a mortally wounded man. 25 I will strengthen the arms of the king of Babylon, but the arms of Pharaoh will fall limp. Then they will know that I am the Lord, when I put my sword into the hand of the king of Babylon and he brandishes it against Egypt. 26 I will disperse the Egyptians among the nations and scatter them through the countries. Then they will know that I am the Lord."* (Ezek. 30:20-26)

God then compares Egypt with Assyria, once a luxurious beautiful tree in Lebanon, which He felled and cast into dishonor: *"In the eleventh year, in the third month on the first day, the word of the Lord came to me: 2 "Son of man, say to Pharaoh king of Egypt and to his hordes:*

"'Who can be compared with you in majesty?
3 Consider Assyria, once a cedar in Lebanon,
with beautiful branches overshadowing the forest;
it towered on high,
its top above the thick foliage.
4 The waters nourished it,
deep springs made it grow tall;
their streams flowed
all around its base
and sent their channels
to all the trees of the field.
5 So it towered higher
than all the trees of the field;
its boughs increased
and its branches grew long,
spreading because of abundant waters.
6 All the birds of the sky
nested in its boughs,
all the animals of the wild
gave birth under its branches;
all the great nations
lived in its shade.
7 It was majestic in beauty,
with its spreading boughs,
for its roots went down
to abundant waters.
8 The cedars in the garden of God

could not rival it,
nor could the junipers
equal its boughs,
nor could the plane trees
compare with its branches—
no tree in the garden of God
could match its beauty.
9 I made it beautiful
with abundant branches,
the envy of all the trees of Eden
in the garden of God.
10 “‘Therefore this is what the Sovereign Lord says: Because the great cedar towered over the thick foliage, and because it was proud of its height, 11 I gave it into the hands of the ruler of the nations, for him to deal with according to its wickedness. I cast it aside, 12 and the most ruthless of foreign nations cut it down and left it. Its boughs fell on the mountains and in all the valleys; its branches lay broken in all the ravines of the land. All the nations of the earth came out from under its shade and left it. 13 All the birds settled on the fallen tree, and all the wild animals lived among its branches. 14 Therefore no other trees by the waters are ever to tower proudly on high, lifting their tops above the thick foliage. No other trees so well-watered are ever to reach such a height; they are all destined for death, for the earth below, among mortals who go down to the realm of the dead.” (Ezek. 31:1-14)

Because of Egypt’s pride and self dependence, God will cause a similar fate to come upon the nation of Egypt. Just as He cast out Satan/Lucifer from heaven because of his pride, so God will cast out Egypt*: “‘Which of the trees of Eden can be compared with you in splendor and majesty? Yet you, too, will be brought down with the trees of Eden to the earth below; you will lie among the uncircumcised, with those killed by the sword. “‘This is Pharaoh and all his hordes, declares the Sovereign LORD.’”* (Ezek. 31:18)

James 5

Despite the fact that many of us, if totally honest, would confess a desire to live in wealth, power and privilege, James warns us about the blinding effect of wealth on the human soul and spirit:
“Now listen, you rich people, weep and wail because of the misery that is coming on you. 2 Your wealth has rotted, and moths have eaten your clothes. 3 Your gold and silver are corroded. Their corrosion will testify against you and eat your flesh like fire. You have hoarded wealth in the last days. 4 Look! The wages you failed to pay the workers who mowed your fields are crying out against you. The cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord Almighty. 5 You have lived on earth in luxury and self-indulgence. You have fattened yourselves in the day of slaughter. 6 You have condemned and murdered the innocent one, who was not opposing you.” (James 5:1-6) Jesus reminded us that our treasure should be in heaven: *“But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moths and vermin do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal.”* (Matthew 6:20)

Patience and honesty in dealing with others are held up as watchwords for those living the Kingdom life. Our timing is not God's- we many times must be patient and wait for the better result that God has planned and stored up for us: *"Be patient, then, brothers and sisters, until the Lord's coming. See how the farmer waits for the land to yield its valuable crop, patiently waiting for the autumn and spring rains. 8 You too, be patient and stand firm, because the Lord's coming is near. 9 Don't grumble against one another, brothers and sisters, or you will be judged. The Judge is standing at the door!*

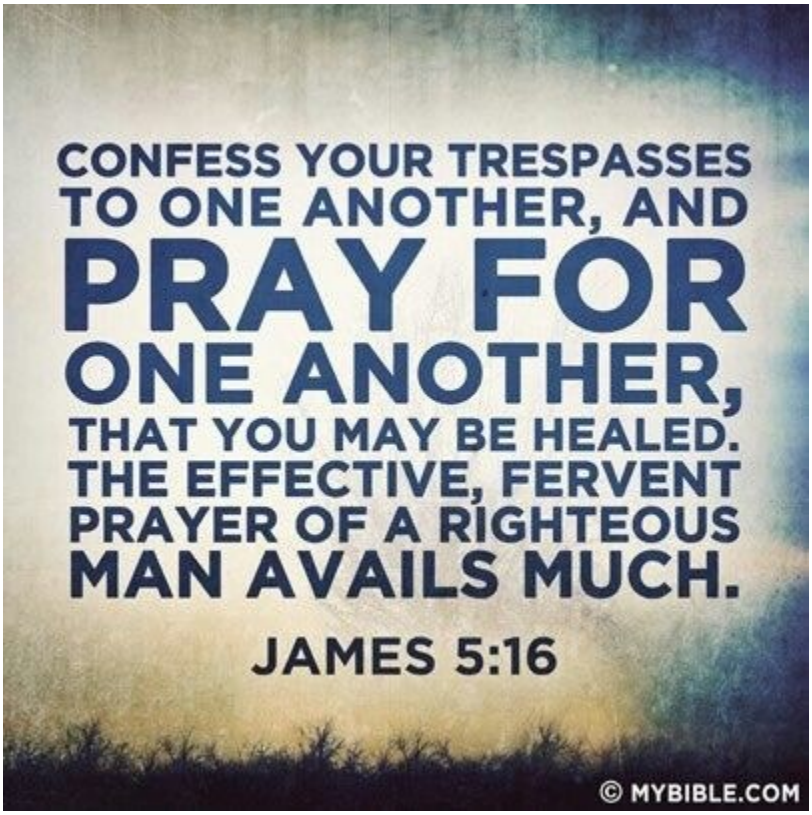
10 Brothers and sisters, as an example of patience in the face of suffering, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord. 11 As you know, we count as blessed those who have persevered. You have heard of Job's perseverance and have seen what the Lord finally brought about. The Lord is full of compassion and mercy.

12 Above all, my brothers and sisters, do not swear—not by heaven or by earth or by anything else. All you need to say is a simple "Yes" or "No." Otherwise you will be condemned." (James 5:7-12)

Lastly we should pray- always believing, and be faithful to rescue those who have lost their way. There is "great rejoicing in Heaven" when one of these lost sheep ius returned to the fold (Luke 15:7-10): *"Is anyone among you in trouble? Let them pray. Is anyone happy? Let them sing songs of praise. 14 Is anyone among you sick? Let them call the elders of the church to pray over them and anoint them with oil in the name of the Lord. 15 And the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well; the Lord will raise them up. If they have sinned, they will be forgiven. 16 Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective.*

17 Elijah was a human being, even as we are. He prayed earnestly that it would not rain, and it did not rain on the land for three and a half years. 18 Again he prayed, and the heavens gave rain, and the earth produced its crops.

19 My brothers and sisters, if one of you should wander from the truth and someone should bring that person back, 20 remember this: Whoever turns a sinner from the error of their way will save them from death and cover over a multitude of sins." (James 5:13-20)



http://www.stadiumvillagechurch.org/prayer-team/

Ezekiel 32-33 November 24, 2014 1 Peter 1

God then instructs Ezekiel to give a lament over the Pharaoh- symbol of Egypt. God is punishing Egypt for her trachery, but does not delight in this dreadful punishment: *"In the twelfth year, in the twelfth month on the first day, the word of the Lord came to me: 2 "Son of man, take up a lament concerning Pharaoh king of Egypt and say to him:*

"'You are like a lion among the nations;
you are like a monster in the seas
thrashing about in your streams,
churning the water with your feet
and muddying the streams.
3 "'This is what the Sovereign Lord says:

"'With a great throng of people
I will cast my net over you,
and they will haul you up in my net.
4 I will throw you on the land
and hurl you on the open field.
I will let all the birds of the sky settle on you
and all the animals of the wild gorge themselves on you.
5 I will spread your flesh on the mountains
and fill the valleys with your remains.
6 I will drench the land with your flowing blood

all the way to the mountains,
and the ravines will be filled with your flesh.
7 When I snuff you out, I will cover the heavens
and darken their stars;
I will cover the sun with a cloud,
and the moon will not give its light.
8 All the shining lights in the heavens
I will darken over you;
I will bring darkness over your land,
declares the Sovereign Lord." (Ezekiel 32:1-8)
Matthew Henry's Commentary is especiallt helpful here: *We have two distinct prophecies in this chapter relating to Egypt, both in the same month, one on the 1st day, the other that day fortnight, probably both on the sabbath day. They are both lamentations, not only to signify how lamentable the fall of Egypt should be, but to intimate how much the prophet himself should lament it, from a generous principle of love to mankind. The destruction of Egypt is here represented under two similitudes:— 1. The killing of a lion, or a whale, or some such devouring creature (v. 1-16). The funeral of a great commander or captain-general (v. 17-32). The two prophecies of this chapter are much of the same length.* (http://www.biblestudytools.com/commentaries/matthew-henry-complete/ezekiel/32.html).

To punish Egypt, God will use another pagan nation, Babylon: *"'For this is what the Sovereign Lord says:*

"'The sword of the king of Babylon
will come against you.
12 I will cause your hordes to fall
by the swords of mighty men—
the most ruthless of all nations.
They will shatter the pride of Egypt,
and all her hordes will be overthrown." (Ezek. 32:11-12)

Egypt will be consigned to the "pit", along with Assyria and Edom (verses 22-25): *"In the twelfth year, on the fifteenth day of the month, the word of the Lord came to me: 18 "Son of man, wail for the hordes of Egypt and consign to the earth below both her and the daughters of mighty nations, along with those who go down to the pit. 19 Say to them, 'Are you more favored than others? Go down and be laid among the uncircumcised.' 20 They will fall among those killed by the sword. The sword is drawn; let her be dragged off with all her hordes. 21 From within the realm of the dead the mighty leaders will say of Egypt and her allies, 'They have come down and they lie with the uncircumcised, with those killed by the sword.'"* (Ezek. 32:17-21)

Ezekiel then is returned to his role as "watchman"- one who declares that disasters are pending- to warn the people of these disasters and the dire consequences of their spiritual indifference. God reminds Ezekiel that He will hold Ezekiel accountable for their blood (verse 6): *"The word of the Lord came to me: 2 "Son of man, speak to your people and say to them: 'When I bring the sword against a land, and the people of the land choose one of their men and make him their watchman, 3 and he sees the sword coming against the land and blows the trumpet to warn the*

people, 4 then if anyone hears the trumpet but does not heed the warning and the sword comes and takes their life, their blood will be on their own head. 5 Since they heard the sound of the trumpet but did not heed the warning, their blood will be on their own head. If they had heeded the warning, they would have saved themselves. 6 But if the watchman sees the sword coming and does not blow the trumpet to warn the people and the sword comes and takes someone's life, that person's life will be taken because of their sin, but I will hold the watchman accountable for their blood.'

7 "Son of man, I have made you a watchman for the people of Israel; so hear the word I speak and give them warning from me. 8 When I say to the wicked, 'You wicked person, you will surely die,' and you do not speak out to dissuade them from their ways, that wicked person will die for[a] their sin, and I will hold you accountable for their blood. 9 But if you do warn the wicked person to turn from their ways and they do not do so, they will die for their sin, though you yourself will be saved.

10 "Son of man, say to the Israelites, 'This is what you are saying: "Our offenses and sins weigh us down, and we are wasting away because of[b] them. How then can we live?'"(Ezekiel 33:1-10)

Once more, God reminds Ezekiel that He taks no delight in the death or punishment of the wicked, but desires that all would return to Him and live: *"Say to them, 'As surely as I live, declares the Sovereign Lord, I take no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but rather that they turn from their ways and live. Turn! Turn from your evil ways! Why will you die, people of Israel?'"* (Ezekiel 33:11) It is almost as if God cannot believe that His people would choose death over life, disobedience over fellowship, punishment over blessing.

Despite God's grace, mercy and patience with them, the people still prefer disobedience*: "Yet your people say, 'The way of the Lord is not just.' But it is their way that is not just. 18 If a righteous person turns from their righteousness and does evil, they will die for it. 19 And if a wicked person turns away from their wickedness and does what is just and right, they will live by doing so. 20 Yet you Israelites say, 'The way of the Lord is not just.' But I will judge each of you according to your own ways."* (Ezekiel 33:17-20)

Jerusalem feell for very simple and obvious reasons- the continued indifference of the people toward the One Tue God, their persistence in idol worship, and their disregard for everything moral, just and clean. Yet they act as if they are entitled to the Land (verse 24): *"Then the word of the Lord came to me: 24 "Son of man, the people living in those ruins in the land of Israel are saying, 'Abraham was only one man, yet he possessed the land. But we are many; surely the land has been given to us as our possession.' 25 Therefore say to them, 'This is what the Sovereign Lord says: Since you eat meat with the blood still in it and look to your idols and shed blood, should you then possess the land? 26 You rely on your sword, you do detestable things, and each of you defiles his neighbor's wife. Should you then possess the land?'*

27 "Say this to them: 'This is what the Sovereign Lord says: As surely as I live, those who are left in the ruins will fall by the sword, those out in the country I will give to the wild animals to be devoured, and those in strongholds and caves will die of a plague. 28 I will make the land a desolate waste, and her proud strength will come to an end, and the mountains of Israel will become desolate so that no one will cross them. 29 Then they will know that I am the Lord, when I have made the land a desolate waste because of all the detestable things they have done.'

30 "As for you, son of man, your people are talking together about you by the walls and at the doors of the houses, saying to each other, 'Come and hear the message that has come from the Lord.' 31 My people come to you, as they usually do, and sit before you to hear your words, but they do not put them into practice. Their mouths speak of love, but their hearts are greedy for unjust gain. 32 Indeed, to them you are nothing more than one who sings love songs with a beautiful voice and plays an instrument well, for they hear your words but do not put them into practice.

33 "When all this comes true—and it surely will—then they will know that a prophet has been among them." (Ezek. 323-33). Yes, the people will indeed (finally!) realize that a "prophet has been among them" when they understand the consequences of their disobedient living.

1 Peter 1

The New Testament writings of Peter are fewer in number than those of Paul. Peter was called to minister to the Hebrew people, and Paul primarily to the Gentiles. The very massiveness of Paul's writing has led to an unmistakable Pauline impint on much of theology, both in the early church and today. We should not, though, underestimate the importance of the writings of the apostle Peter. As should be expected, the "higher" or "literary" critics doubt the Petrine authorship of this epistle (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/First_Epistle_of_Peter).

The greeting of 1 Peter is to "the elect" scattered through the ancient world. The language is consistent with a Calvinistic theology, in which the elect are known by God from the beginning and were predestined to accept the Gospel: *"Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ,*
To God's elect, exiles scattered throughout the provinces of Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia and Bithynia, 2 who have been chosen according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, through the sanctifying work of the Spirit, to be obedient to Jesus Christ and sprinkled with his blood:
Grace and peace be yours in abundance." (1 Peter 1:1-2)

Peter then delivers a very strong message of hope- of "living hope" (verse 3) which is an inspiration and source of strength to the "exiles": *"Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, 4 and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade. This inheritance is kept in heaven for you, 5 who through faith are shielded by God's power until the coming of the salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time. 6 In all this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. 7 These have come so that the proven genuineness of your faith—of greater*

worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire—may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed. 8 Though you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy, 9 for you are receiving the end result of your faith, the salvation of your souls." (1 Peter 1:3-9)

Peter then reminds his Jewish listeners that this Messiah, which they now know to be Jesus, was promised by the prophets over many years: *"Concerning this salvation, the prophets, who spoke of the grace that was to come to you, searched intently and with the greatest care, 11 trying to find out the time and circumstances to which the Spirit of Christ in them was pointing when he predicted the sufferings of the Messiah and the glories that would follow. 12 It was revealed to them that they were not serving themselves but you, when they spoke of the things that have now been told you by those who have preached the gospel to you by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven. Even angels long to look into these things."* (1 Peter 1:10-12)

"Therefore" is a word we should always look for in Scripture. Peter uses it here to point us to a conclusion from that which has just been stated and explained. The "therefore" here is the conclusion that the people of God should : 1) be holy (separate and apart from the world and totally focused and dedicated to God); and 2) love each other (deeply and from the heart): *"Therefore, with minds that are alert and fully sober, set your hope on the grace to be brought to you when Jesus Christ is revealed at his coming. 14 As obedient children, do not conform to the evil desires you had when you lived in ignorance. 15 But just as he who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do; 16 for it is written: "Be holy, because I am holy."[a]*

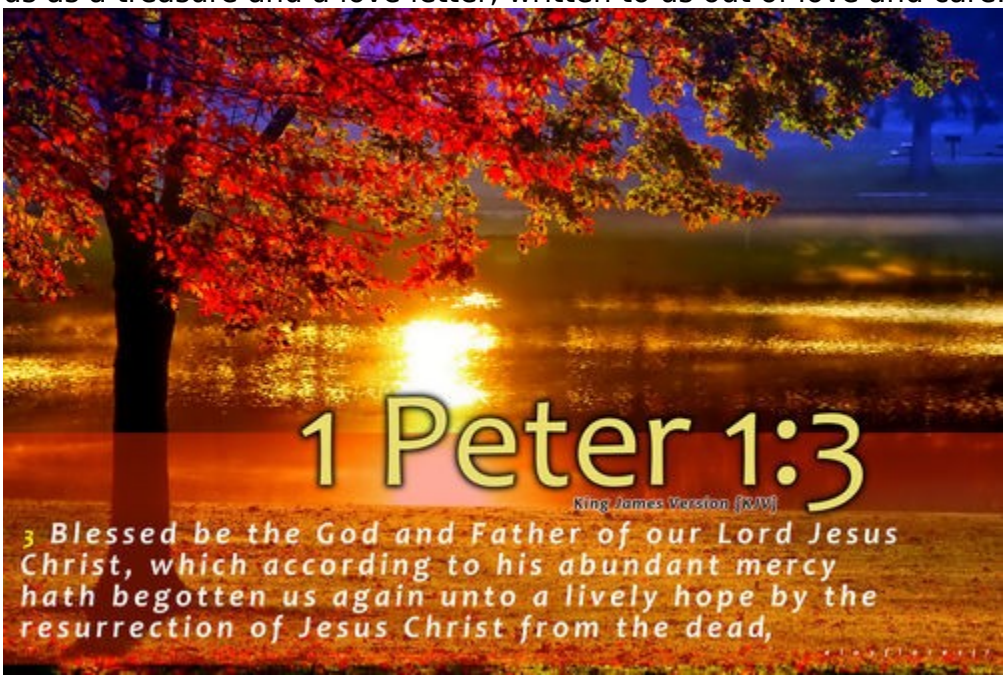
17 Since you call on a Father who judges each person's work impartially, live out your time as foreigners here in reverent fear. 18 For you know that it was not with perishable things such as silver or gold that you were redeemed from the empty way of life handed down to you from your ancestors, 19 but with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect. 20 He was chosen before the creation of the world, but was revealed in these last times for your sake. 21 Through him you believe in God, who raised him from the dead and glorified him, and so your faith and hope are in God.

22 Now that you have purified yourselves by obeying the truth so that you have sincere love for each other, love one another deeply, from the heart." (1 Peter 1:13-22).

The follows one of the most powerful testimonies to the truth, value, and enduring character of God's Word: *"For you have been born again, not of perishable seed, but of imperishable, through the living and enduring word of God. 24 For,*

"All people are like grass,
and all their glory is like the flowers of the field;
the grass withers and the flowers fall,
25 but the word of the Lord endures forever."
And this is the word that was preached to you." (1 Peter 1:23-25)

Just as Nicodemus was told by Jesus “you must be born again” (John 3:7), Peter reminds the believers that they were literally reborn by the Holy Spirit- they are- and are becoming- new creatures in Christ (2 Cor. 5:17) And this Word is not some transient document, some faddish notion that dreamers and fools persuade themselves is true- this is the very living and breathing Word of God Himself- give to us as a treasure and a love letter, written to us out of love and care.



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Ezekiel 34-35 November 25, 2014 1 Peter 2

Many times God acts out the role that He is taking with His prople, and He does so in a way that communicates both the substance and depth of feeling of His relational role. The prople, never far from their nomadic roots, would instinctively understand the role of Shepherd. Later God would reveal Himself- and the Son- in a fuller role as Jesus would teach that He was/is the “good shepherd” who would lay down His life for the sheep. (John 10:11)

Here God promises to care for His people, in a manner far superior to those who have cared for them up to this point: *“The word of the Lord came to me: 2 “Son of man, prophesy against the shepherds of Israel; prophesy and say to them: ‘This is what the Sovereign Lord says: Woe to you shepherds of Israel who only take care of yourselves! Should not shepherds take care of the flock? 3 You eat the curds, clothe yourselves with the wool and slaughter the choice animals, but you do not take care of the flock. 4 You have not strengthened the weak or healed the sick or bound up the injured. You have not brought back the strays or searched for the lost. You have ruled them harshly and brutally. 5 So they were scattered because there was no shepherd, and when they were scattered they became food for all the wild animals. 6 My sheep wandered over all the mountains and on every high hill. They were scattered over the whole earth, and no one searched or looked for them.*

7 “‘Therefore, you shepherds, hear the word of the Lord: 8 As surely as I live, declares the Sovereign Lord, because my flock lacks a shepherd and so has been plundered and has become food for all the wild animals, and because my shepherds did not search for my flock but cared for themselves rather than for my flock, 9 therefore, you shepherds, hear the word of the Lord: 10 This is what the Sovereign Lord says: I am against the shepherds and will hold them accountable for my flock. I will remove them from tending the flock so that the shepherds can no longer feed themselves. I will rescue my flock from their mouths, and it will no longer be food for them.” (Ezek. 34:1-10)

God then goes on to further explain the role that He will play with His people. We must remember that He had always insisted on being their King, but the people demanded- and got- earthly kings (1 Sam. 8:1-22) God is reminding them here how setiously and completely these earthly kings have failed them: *“‘For this is what the Sovereign Lord says: I myself will search for my sheep and look after them. 12 As a shepherd looks after his scattered flock when he is with them, so will I look after my sheep. I will rescue them from all the places where they were scattered on a day of clouds and darkness. 13 I will bring them out from the nations and gather them from the countries, and I will bring them into their own land. I will pasture them on the mountains of Israel, in the ravines and in all the settlements in the land. 14 I will tend them in a good pasture, and the mountain heights of Israel will be their grazing land. There they will lie down in good grazing land, and there they will feed in a rich pasture on the mountains of Israel. 15 I myself will tend my sheep and have them lie down, declares the Sovereign Lord. 16 I will search for the lost and bring back the strays. I will bind up the injured and strengthen the weak, but the sleek and the strong I will destroy. I will shepherd the flock with justice.*

17 “‘As for you, my flock, this is what the Sovereign Lord says: I will judge between one sheep and another, and between rams and goats. 18 Is it not enough for you to feed on the good pasture? Must you also trample the rest of your pasture with your feet? Is it not enough for you to drink clear water? Must you also muddy the rest with your feet? 19 Must my flock feed on what you have trampled and drink what you have muddied with your feet?

20 “‘Therefore this is what the Sovereign Lord says to them: See, I myself will judge between the fat sheep and the lean sheep. 21 Because you shove with flank and shoulder, butting all the weak sheep with your horns until you have driven them away, 22 I will save my flock, and they will no longer be plundered. I will judge between one sheep and another. 23 I will place over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he will tend them; he will tend them and be their shepherd. 24 I the Lord will be their God, and my servant David will be prince among them. I the Lord have spoken.” (Ezek. 34:11-24) One again the line of David is pronounced to be the legitimate blood line of the throne of God- and we see the fulfilment of this in the King of Kings- the Lord Jesus who was a blood descendant of David!

And amazingly, graciously, God promises to make a covenant with them, to restore and protect them from their enemies: *“‘I will make a covenant of peace with them and rid the land of savage beasts so that they may live in the wilderness and sleep in the forests in safety. 26 I will make them and the places surrounding my hill a blessing. I will send down showers in season; there will be showers of blessing. 27*

The trees will yield their fruit and the ground will yield its crops; the people will be secure in their land. They will know that I am the Lord, when I break the bars of their yoke and rescue them from the hands of those who enslaved them. 28 They will no longer be plundered by the nations, nor will wild animals devour them. They will live in safety, and no one will make them afraid. 29 I will provide for them a land renowned for its crops, and they will no longer be victims of famine in the land or bear the scorn of the nations. 30 Then they will know that I, the Lord their God, am with them and that they, the Israelites, are my people, declares the Sovereign Lord. 31 You are my sheep, the sheep of my pasture, and I am your God, declares the Sovereign Lord.'" (Ezek. 34:25-31)

http://steadfastlutherans.org/?p=32815

Once again God pronounces harsh judgment on Edom: *"The word of the Lord came to me: 2 "Son of man, set your face against Mount Seir; prophesy against it 3 and say: 'This is what the Sovereign Lord says: I am against you, Mount Seir, and I will stretch out my hand against you and make you a desolate waste. 4 I will turn your towns into ruins and you will be desolate. Then you will know that I am the Lord.*

5 "'Because you harbored an ancient hostility and delivered the Israelites over to the sword at the time of their calamity, the time their punishment reached its climax, 6 therefore as surely as I live, declares the Sovereign Lord, I will give you over to bloodshed and it will pursue you. Since you did not hate bloodshed, bloodshed will pursue you. 7 I will make Mount Seir a desolate waste and cut off from it all who come and go. 8 I will fill your mountains with the slain; those killed by the sword will fall on your hills and in your valleys and in all your ravines. 9 I will make you desolate forever; your towns will not be inhabited. Then you will know that I am the Lord." (Ezek 35:1-9)

The historic abandonment of Israel to its enemies ((Numbers 20:14-21; Judges 11:17)), and the arrogance and greed of the people of Moab are listed by God as the reasons that this judgment is taking place. God certainly does not need to justify His actions to us, but often uses His actions to teach us and enlighten us as to His ways: *"'Because you harbored an ancient hostility and delivered the Israelites over to the sword at the time of their calamity, the time their punishment reached its climax, 6 therefore as surely as I live, declares the Sovereign Lord, I will give you*

over to bloodshed and it will pursue you. Since you did not hate bloodshed, bloodshed will pursue you. 7 I will make Mount Seir a desolate waste and cut off from it all who come and go. 8 I will fill your mountains with the slain; those killed by the sword will fall on your hills and in your valleys and in all your ravines. 9 I will make you desolate forever; your towns will not be inhabited. Then you will know that I am the Lord.

"'Because you have said, "These two nations and countries will be ours and we will take possession of them," even though I the Lord was there, 11 therefore as surely as I live, declares the Sovereign Lord, I will treat you in accordance with the anger and jealousy you showed in your hatred of them and I will make myself known among them when I judge you. 12 Then you will know that I the Lord have heard all the contemptible things you have said against the mountains of Israel. You said, "They have been laid waste and have been given over to us to devour." 13 You boasted against me and spoke against me without restraint, and I heard it. 14 This is what the Sovereign Lord says: While the whole earth rejoices, I will make you desolate. 15 Because you rejoiced when the inheritance of Israel became desolate, that is how I will treat you. You will be desolate, Mount Seir, you and all of Edom. Then they will know that I am the Lord.'" (Ezek. 35:5-15)

1 Peter 2

Peter then admonishes the saonts to "grow up" and attain the maturity in the faith that comes from living it daily*: "Therefore, rid yourselves of all malice and all deceit, hypocrisy, envy, and slander of every kind. 2 Like newborn babies, crave pure spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow up in your salvation, 3 now that you have tasted that the Lord is good."* (1 Pet. 2:1-3).

The next passage of Scripture has a special meaning and memory for me. While on a spiritual life retreat with my church, we were instructed to go out by ourselves for 30 minutes, taking only our Bibles, and meditate, pray, and ask God to give us new insights and ideas. I remember to this day my sister Eda Egger praying in the Spirit, and commenting later that she had not spent time with God in prayer that way for a long while. It was beautiful to hear! The passage that the Spirit opened up to me was this one, about the people of God being "living stones". Maybe it was the fact that I had been on several mission trips when we made physical church walls from concrete block (modern "stones"), but whatever the reason this image seemed gloriously vivid to me- the very people of God being "built" into something beautiful and lasting- something that testified to the Spirit of God with us on this earth! This is the passage: *"As you come to him, the living Stone—rejected by humans but chosen by God and precious to him— 5 you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house[a] to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. 6 For in Scripture it says:*

"See, I lay a stone in Zion,
a chosen and precious cornerstone,
and the one who trusts in him
will never be put to shame."
7 Now to you who believe, this stone is precious. But to those who do not believe,

“The stone the builders rejected
has become the cornerstone,”
8 and,

“A stone that causes people to stumble
and a rock that makes them fall.”
They stumble because they disobey the message—which is also what they were destined for.

9 But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. 10 Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.” (1 Peter 2:4-10). Just as Jesus is the “Living Stone” the builders rejected, He is now the Cornerstone- and we are privileged to reflect this reality in some way- that He alone is the One who called us “out of darkness” (verse 9).

Peter then challendges us to live as a “colony” on a hostile Earth, an “outpost” of godly people who reflect the Light of God to those around them. We are, after all, called to be a “lighthouse”- not only sharing light but protecting those around us from stumbling on the rocks- visible and hidden! There will inevitably be suffering, just as the One who saved us has to suffer the injustice of sinful men: *“When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats. Instead, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly. 24 “He himself bore our sins” in his body on the cross, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; “by his wounds you have been healed.” 25 For “you were like sheep going astray,” but now you have returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls.”* (1 Peter 2:23-25).

Ezekiel 36-37 November 26, 2014 1 Peter 3

God speaks to the mountauins of Israel, and proclaims that they will once again be blessed. They will be a symbol of the restoration of God’s people from exile: *“Son of man, prophesy to the mountains of Israel and say, ‘Mountains of Israel, hear the word of the Lord. 2 This is what the Sovereign Lord says: The enemy said of you, “Aha! The ancient heights have become our possession.”’ 3 Therefore prophesy and say, ‘This is what the Sovereign Lord says: Because they ravaged and crushed you from every side so that you became the possession of the rest of the nations and the object of people’s malicious talk and slander, 4 therefore, mountains of Israel, hear the word of the Sovereign Lord: This is what the Sovereign Lord says to the mountains and hills, to the ravines and valleys, to the desolate ruins and the deserted towns that have been plundered and ridiculed by the rest of the nations around you— 5 this is what the Sovereign Lord says: In my burning zeal I have spoken against the rest of the nations, and against all Edom, for with glee and with malice in their hearts they made my land their own possession so that they might plunder its pastureland.’ 6 Therefore prophesy concerning the land of Israel and say to the mountains and hills, to the ravines and valleys: ‘This is what the Sovereign Lord says: I speak in my jealous wrath because you have suffered the scorn of the nations. 7 Therefore this is what the Sovereign Lord says: I swear with uplifted hand that the nations around you will also suffer scorn.*

8 “‘But you, mountains of Israel, will produce branches and fruit for my people Israel, for they will soon come home. 9 I am concerned for you and will look on you with favor; you will be plowed and sown, 10 and I will cause many people to live on you—yes, all of Israel. The towns will be inhabited and the ruins rebuilt. 11 I will increase the number of people and animals living on you, and they will be fruitful and become numerous. I will settle people on you as in the past and will make you prosper more than before. Then you will know that I am the Lord. 12 I will cause people, my people Israel, to live on you. They will possess you, and you will be their inheritance; you will never again deprive them of their children.”(Ezek. 36:1-12)

Then another prophecy is given to Ezekiel- the peoplewill be restiored, and their sins forgiven.. God promises, as He did in Jeremiah, to give them hearts of flesh instead of herts of stone. Once again Israwel will be retored and complete: *“Again the word of the Lord came to me: 17 “Son of man, when the people of Israel were living in their own land, they defiled it by their conduct and their actions. Their conduct was like a woman’s monthly uncleanness in my sight. 18 So I poured out my wrath on them because they had shed blood in the land and because they had defiled it with their idols. 19 I dispersed them among the nations, and they were scattered through the countries; I judged them according to their conduct and their actions. 20 And wherever they went among the nations they profaned my holy name, for it was said of them, ‘These are the Lord’s people, and yet they had to leave his land.’ 21 I had concern for my holy name, which the people of Israel profaned among the nations where they had gone.*

22 “Therefore say to the Israelites, ‘This is what the Sovereign Lord says: It is not for your sake, people of Israel, that I am going to do these things, but for the sake of my holy name, which you have profaned among the nations where you have gone. 23 I will show the holiness of my great name, which has been profaned among the nations, the name you have profaned among them. Then the nations will know that I am the Lord, declares the Sovereign Lord, when I am proved holy through you before their eyes.

24 “‘For I will take you out of the nations; I will gather you from all the countries and bring you back into your own land. 25 I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean; I will cleanse you from all your impurities and from all your idols. 26 I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. 27 And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws. 28 Then you will live in the land I gave your ancestors; you will be my people, and I will be your God. 29 I will save you from all your uncleanness. I will call for the grain and make it plentiful and will not bring famine upon you. 30 I will increase the fruit of the trees and the crops of the field, so that you will no longer suffer disgrace among the nations because of famine. 31 Then you will remember your evil ways and wicked deeds, and you will loathe yourselves for your sins and detestable practices. 32 I want you to know that I am not doing this for your sake, declares the Sovereign Lord. Be ashamed and disgraced for your conduct, people of Israel!

33 “‘This is what the Sovereign Lord says: On the day I cleanse you from all your sins, I will resettle your towns, and the ruins will be rebuilt.” (Ezekiel 36:16-33). The problem with this prophecy is that it does not match the historic record. Israel was

only partly restored, and most of the tribes remained scattered among the nations- some of which lost their identity completely “the lost tribes” (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ten_Lost_Tribes). The best way out of this quandary is to examine carefully the words of verse 33- God promises that “one day” He will cleanse them from sin, resettle the towns and rebuild ruins. This in my view is a “long term” prophecy, which has only partly been fulfilled. The very existence of the modern nation of Israel stands as testimony to this partial fulfilment. It is certainly God’s will to reunite and resotre His people, and my belief is that it will be a future event.

We then encounter a chapter that is memorable to many in this book of prophecy, and is one of the few parts of Ezekiel that the “average Bible reader” is familiar with- the unmistakably memorable picture of Ezekile prophesying to the “dry bones”. This symbolism gives us an insight into how God sees any of us who are “dead” spiritually- as walking dead! (http://www.gotquestions.org/valley-dry-bones.html) Ezekiel is told: *“Then he said to me, “Prophesy to these bones and say to them, ‘Dry bones, hear the word of the Lord! 5 This is what the Sovereign Lord says to these bones: I will make breath[a] enter you, and you will come to life. 6 I will attach tendons to you and make flesh come upon you and cover you with skin; I will put breath in you, and you will come to life. Then you will know that I am the Lord.’”*

7 So I prophesied as I was commanded. And as I was prophesying, there was a noise, a rattling sound, and the bones came together, bone to bone. 8 I looked, and tendons and flesh appeared on them and skin covered them, but there was no breath in them.

9 Then he said to me, “Prophesy to the breath; prophesy, son of man, and say to it, ‘This is what the Sovereign Lord says: Come, breath, from the four winds and breathe into these slain, that they may live.’” 10 So I prophesied as he commanded me, and breath entered them; they came to life and stood up on their feet—a vast army.

11 Then he said to me: “Son of man, these bones are the people of Israel. They say, ‘Our bones are dried up and our hope is gone; we are cut off.’ 12 Therefore prophesy and say to them: ‘This is what the Sovereign Lord says: My people, I am going to open your graves and bring you up from them; I will bring you back to the land of Israel. 13 Then you, my people, will know that I am the Lord, when I open your graves and bring you up from them. 14 I will put my Spirit in you and you will live, and I will settle you in your own land. Then you will know that I the Lord have spoken, and I have done it, declares the Lord.’”(Ezek. 37:4-14)

We then encounter another prophecy that has only partly been filfuilled in history as we know it- the reunification of the tribes of Israel. In the symbolism used here of “sticks”, the tribes will once again be joined together: *“The word of the Lord came to me: 16 “Son of man, take a stick of wood and write on it, ‘Belonging to Judah and the Israelites associated with him.’ Then take another stick of wood, and write on it, ‘Belonging to Joseph (that is, to Ephraim) and all the Israelites associated with him.’ 17 Join them together into one stick so that they will become one in your hand.*

18 “When your people ask you, ‘Won’t you tell us what you mean by this?’ 19 say to them, ‘This is what the Sovereign Lord says: I am going to take the stick of Joseph—which is in Ephraim’s hand—and of the Israelite tribes associated with him, and join it to Judah’s stick. I will make them into a single stick of wood, and they will become one in my hand.’ 20 Hold before their eyes the sticks you have written on 21 and say to them, ‘This is what the Sovereign Lord says: I will take the Israelites out of the nations where they have gone. I will gather them from all around and bring them back into their own land. 22 I will make them one nation in the land, on the mountains of Israel. There will be one king over all of them and they will never again be two nations or be divided into two kingdoms. 23 They will no longer defile themselves with their idols and vile images or with any of their offenses, for I will save them from all their sinful backsliding,[b] and I will cleanse them. They will be my people, and I will be their God.

24 “‘My servant David will be king over them, and they will all have one shepherd. They will follow my laws and be careful to keep my decrees. 25 They will live in the land I gave to my servant Jacob, the land where your ancestors lived. They and their children and their children’s children will live there forever, and David my servant will be their prince forever. 26 I will make a covenant of peace with them; it will be an everlasting covenant. I will establish them and increase their numbers, and I will put my sanctuary among them forever. 27 My dwelling place will be with them; I will be their God, and they will be my people. 28 Then the nations will know that I the Lord make Israel holy, when my sanctuary is among them forever.’” (Ezekiel 37:15-28).

1 Peter 3

The language here is reminiscent of some of the Pauline letters, as Peter addresses some of the issues of the complex relationship between men and women in marriage: *“Wives, in the same way submit yourselves to your own husbands so that, if any of them do not believe the word, they may be won over without words by the behavior of their wives, 2 when they see the purity and reverence of your lives. 3 Your beauty should not come from outward adornment, such as elaborate hairstyles and the wearing of gold jewelry or fine clothes. 4 Rather, it should be that of your inner self, the unfading beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit, which is of great worth in God’s sight. 5 For this is the way the holy women of the past who put their hope in God used to adorn themselves. They submitted themselves to their own husbands, 6 like Sarah, who obeyed Abraham and called him her lord. You are her daughters if you do what is right and do not give way to fear.*

7 Husbands, in the same way be considerate as you live with your wives, and treat them with respect as the weaker partner and as heirs with you of the gracious gift of life, so that nothing will hinder your prayers.” (1 Peter 3:1-7). Wise men know that women are “weaker” only in sheer physical strength and speed- their real strength is within!

Peter reminds us that we should expect some suffering and mistreatment if we are faithful to our calling- the world, after all, rejected the very Lord we serve: *“Finally, all of you, be like-minded, be sympathetic, love one another, be compassionate and humble. 9 Do not repay evil with evil or insult with insult. On the contrary, repay evil*

with blessing, because to this you were called so that you may inherit a blessing. 10 For,

“Whoever would love life
and see good days
must keep their tongue from evil
and their lips from deceitful speech.
11 They must turn from evil and do good;
they must seek peace and pursue it.
12 For the eyes of the Lord are on the righteous
and his ears are attentive to their prayer,
but the face of the Lord is against those who do evil.”
13 Who is going to harm you if you are eager to do good? 14 But even if you should suffer for what is right, you are blessed. “Do not fear their threats; do not be frightened.” 15 But in your hearts revere Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect, 16 keeping a clear conscience, so that those who speak maliciously against your good behavior in Christ may be ashamed of their slander.” (1 Peter 3:8-16)

We will suffer for “doing right”, just as Jesus did- but the prize is our salvation. This worthy goal is worth His and our suffering. We are perfected by suffering and enduring, and given powerful testimony as God shepherds us through a hostile world: *“17 For it is better, if it is God’s will, to suffer for doing good than for doing evil. 18 For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God. He was put to death in the body but made alive in the Spirit. 19 After being made alive, he went and made proclamation to the imprisoned spirits— 20 to those who were disobedient long ago when God waited patiently in the days of Noah while the ark was being built. In it only a few people, eight in all, were saved through water, 21 and this water symbolizes baptism that now saves you also —not the removal of dirt from the body but the pledge of a clear conscience toward God. It saves you by the resurrection of Jesus Christ, 22 who has gone into heaven and is at God’s right hand—with angels, authorities and powers in submission to him.”* (1 Peter 3:17-22)

Ezekiel 38-39 November 27, 2014 1 Peter 4

The great final battle- the Armageddon- is coming! So states this amazing (and alarming) prophecy of Ezeekiel. Many scholars have connected the ancient names of these locations/nations in the ancient world to their modern counterparts (http://www.grantjeffrey.com/article/rusisrl.htm). The chart looks something like this:

The Nations of Ezekiel 38: 1 6	
The Ancient Nations	**The Modern Nations**
The land of Magog	Russia
Meshech and Tubal	Somewhere in Russia
Persia	Iran, Iraq, Afghanistan
Ethiopia	Ethiopia and Sudan
Libya	Libya
Ashkenaz	Austria and Germany
Gomer	Eastern Europe
Togarmah	Southeastern Europe - Turkey
"Many peoples with thee"	Various other nations allied to Russia

Many of the world's nations profoundly hate Israel, and have even stated publically that their goal is the complete destruction of this Jewish state, as seen in this article about the political/religious leadership of Iran: (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mahmoud_Ahmadinejad_and_Israel).

There is certainly an overwhelming political and military power in the potentiall alliance of all these nations listed in the above chart.
Please see also
(http://www.watchmanbiblestudy.com/biblestudies/Ezekiel/Ezekiel38-39_GogMagog.htm).

But instead of entering into endless discussion and speculation as to whether the "end times" are upon us, and the "last days" are litereally around the corner, it is useful to step back from the details and look at the larger picture. God is clearly in control of history. He alone (not even the Son) knows when the "end of days" will come. Some evangelical leadres have speculated that Jesus will wait until the last person on earth that will be saved is saved. (Matthew 24:36- please also see http://www.endtime.com/urgent-questions/when-is-the-rapture/).

God tells Ezekiel about this future conflict: *"The word of the Lord came to me: 2 "Son of man, set your face against Gog, of the land of Magog, the chief prince of Meshek and Tubal; prophesy against him 3 and say: 'This is what the Sovereign Lord says: I am against you, Gog, chief prince of Meshek and Tubal. 4 I will turn you around, put hooks in your jaws and bring you out with your whole army—your horses, your horsemen fully armed, and a great horde with large and small shields, all of them brandishing their swords. 5 Persia, Cush and Put will be with them, all with shields and helmets, 6 also Gomer with all its troops, and Beth Togarmah from the far north with all its troops—the many nations with you.*

7 “‘Get ready; be prepared, you and all the hordes gathered about you, and take command of them. 8 After many days you will be called to arms. In future years you will invade a land that has recovered from war, whose people were gathered from many nations to the mountains of Israel, which had long been desolate. They had been brought out from the nations, and now all of them live in safety. 9 You and all your troops and the many nations with you will go up, advancing like a storm; you will be like a cloud covering the land.

10 “‘This is what the Sovereign Lord says: On that day thoughts will come into your mind and you will devise an evil scheme. 11 You will say, “I will invade a land of unwalled villages; I will attack a peaceful and unsuspecting people—all of them living without walls and without gates and bars. 12 I will plunder and loot and turn my hand against the resettled ruins and the people gathered from the nations, rich in livestock and goods, living at the center of the land.” 13 Sheba and Dedan and the merchants of Tarshish and all her villages[e] will say to you, “Have you come to plunder? Have you gathered your hordes to loot, to carry off silver and gold, to take away livestock and goods and to seize much plunder?”’

14 “Therefore, son of man, prophesy and say to Gog: ‘This is what the Sovereign Lord says: In that day, when my people Israel are living in safety, will you not take notice of it? 15 You will come from your place in the far north, you and many nations with you, all of them riding on horses, a great horde, a mighty army. 16 You will advance against my people Israel like a cloud that covers the land. In days to come, Gog, I will bring you against my land, so that the nations may know me when I am proved holy through you before their eyes.” (Ezek. 38:1-16)

The Lord will exact terrible vengeance on the nations opposing Israel*: “This is what will happen in that day: When Gog attacks the land of Israel, my hot anger will be aroused, declares the Sovereign Lord. 19 In my zeal and fiery wrath I declare that at that time there shall be a great earthquake in the land of Israel. 20 The fish in the sea, the birds in the sky, the beasts of the field, every creature that moves along the ground, and all the people on the face of the earth will tremble at my presence. The mountains will be overturned, the cliffs will crumble and every wall will fall to the ground. 21 I will summon a sword against Gog on all my mountains, declares the Sovereign Lord. Every man’s sword will be against his brother. 22 I will execute judgment on him with plague and bloodshed; I will pour down torrents of rain, hailstones and burning sulfur on him and on his troops and on the many nations with him. 23 And so I will show my greatness and my holiness, and I will make myself known in the sight of many nations. Then they will know that I am the Lord.’”* (Ezekiel 38:18-23)

The point of all this destruction and violence is that the name of the Lord will no longer be profaned by the nations: “‘I will make known my holy name among my people Israel. I will no longer let my holy name be profaned, and the nations will know that I the LORD am the Holy One in Israel.8 It is coming! It will surely take place, declares the Sovereign LORD. This is the day I have spoken of.” (Ezekiel 39:7-8). This is a partial answer to the question raised in the Psalms, in the beautiful and poetic language of the King James translation:
“Why do the heathen rage, and the people imagine a vain thing?

2 The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers take counsel together, against the Lord, and against his anointed, saying,
3 Let us break their bands asunder, and cast away their cords from us.
4 He that sitteth in the heavens shall laugh: the Lord shall have them in derision.
5 Then shall he speak unto them in his wrath, and vex them in his sore displeasure.
6 Yet have I set my king upon my holy hill of Zion.
7 I will declare the decree: the Lord hath said unto me, Thou art my Son; this day have I begotten thee.
8 Ask of me, and I shall give thee the heathen for thine inheritance, and the uttermost parts of the earth for thy possession.
9 Thou shalt break them with a rod of iron; thou shalt dash them in pieces like a potter's vessel.
10 Be wise now therefore, O ye kings: be instructed, ye judges of the earth.
11 Serve the Lord with fear, and rejoice with trembling.

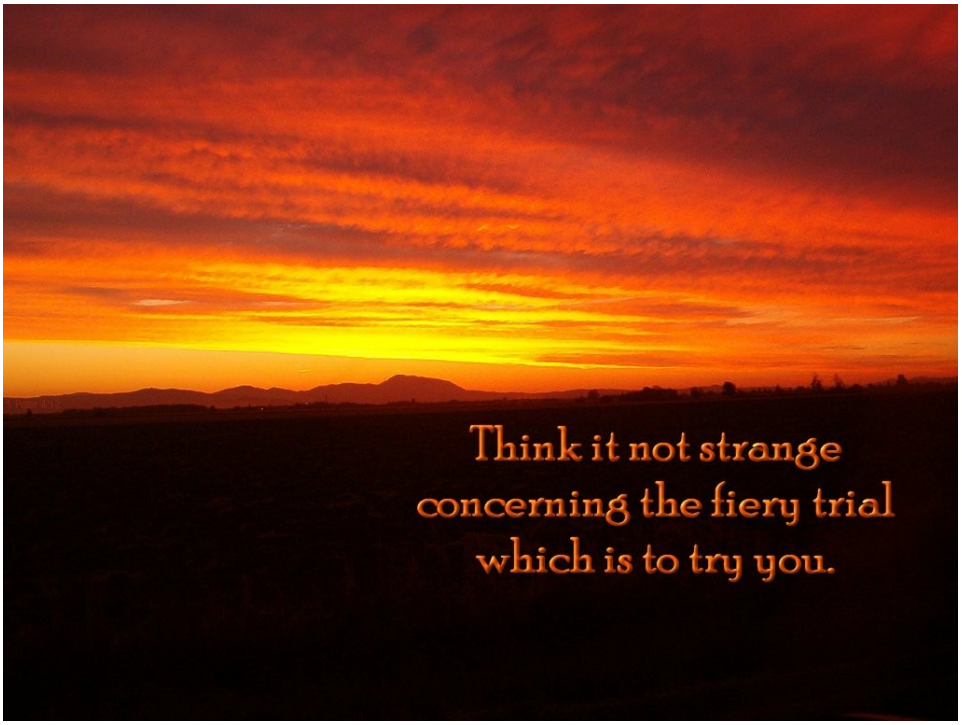
12 Kiss the Son, lest he be angry, and ye perish from the way, when his wrath is kindled but a little. Blessed are all they that put their trust in him. (Psallm 2 KJV)
The Lord promises to gather His people again to the land they were promised, to bless them and fill them with His Spirit: *"Therefore this is what the Sovereign Lord says: I will now restore the fortunes of Jacob and will have compassion on all the people of Israel, and I will be zealous for my holy name. 26 They will forget their shame and all the unfaithfulness they showed toward me when they lived in safety in their land with no one to make them afraid. 27 When I have brought them back from the nations and have gathered them from the countries of their enemies, I will be proved holy through them in the sight of many nations. 28 Then they will know that I am the Lord their God, for though I sent them into exile among the nations, I will gather them to their own land, not leaving any behind. 29 I will no longer hide my face from them, for I will pour out my Spirit on the people of Israel, declares the Sovereign Lord."* (Ezek. 39:25-29)

1 Peter 4

The great power of the Christian is simple- live for the Lord- and he will bless you and give you victory, one day at a time. This way of living in power and grace makes absolutely no sense to the "world", which knows nothing of this Author of every perfect gift: "Therefore, since Christ suffered in his body, arm yourselves also with the same attitude, because whoever suffers in the body is done with sin. 2 As a result, they do not live the rest of their earthly lives for evil human desires, but rather for the will of God." (1 Peter 4:1-2). The world simply cannot believe that anyone would suffer, or deny themselves "earthly pleasures" simply to please an "invisible God"! They are profoundly wrong: *"For you have spent enough time in the past doing what pagans choose to do—living in debauchery, lust, drunkenness, orgies, carousing and detestable idolatry. 4 They are surprised that you do not join them in their reckless, wild living, and they heap abuse on you. 5 But they will have to give account to him who is ready to judge the living and the dead. 6 For this is the reason the gospel was preached even to those who are now dead, so that they might be judged according to human standards in regard to the body, but live according to God in regard to the spirit."* (1 Peter 4:3-6)

Then Peter states a belief that many in the early church held- that the “end” was close at hand. They had certainly heard Jesus’ words about this (Matt. 24:34; Luke 21:32) *“Truly I tell you, this generation will certainly not pass away until all these things have happened.”* Hearing, though, is not identical to understanding. May of “these things” did indeed happen before the generation of those hearing these words passed from the earth. We may also argue that the Resurrection itself was a fulfilment of these words of the Master. However, the “end of all things” has clearly not happened yet! We should always be “ready”- prayed up, ready and willing to testify and give an “account” (2 Tim. 4:2) of what God is doing in our lives- but always aware that “the end”, as all things is in God’s loving and merciful hands. *“The end of all things is near. Therefore be alert and of sober mind so that you may pray. 8 Above all, love each other deeply, because love covers over a multitude of sins. 9 Offer hospitality to one another without grumbling. 10 Each of you should use whatever gift you have received to serve others, as faithful stewards of God’s grace in its various forms. 11 If anyone speaks, they should do so as one who speaks the very words of God. If anyone serves, they should do so with the strength God provides, so that in all things God may be praised through Jesus Christ. To him be the glory and the power for ever and ever. Amen.”* (1 Peter 4:7-11)

Finally, we are not to be surprised when suffering comes. It certainly came to the Lord, and His words are illuminating to us in this regard: *“Remember what I told you: 'A servant is not greater than his master.' If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also. If they obeyed my teaching, they will obey yours also.” (*John 15:20) We have the privilege of sharing in His suffering as part of our experience with Him: *“Dear friends, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal that has come on you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. 13 But rejoice inasmuch as you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed. 14 If you are insulted because of the name of Christ, you are blessed, for the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you. 15 If you suffer, it should not be as a murderer or thief or any other kind of criminal, or even as a meddler. 16 However, if you suffer as a Christian, do not be ashamed, but praise God that you bear that name. 17 For it is time for judgment to begin with God’s household; and if it begins with us, what will the outcome be for those who do not obey the gospel of God? 18 And,*
“If it is hard for the righteous to be saved,
what will become of the ungodly and the sinner?”
19 So then, those who suffer according to God’s will should commit themselves to their faithful Creator and continue to do good.” (1 Peter 4:13-19) Our task is simple- but difficult- love God and continue to “do good” (verse 19). With us alone, this is of course impossible, but with God *“all things are possible”* (Matt. 19:26)



http://www.eaf.net/pantinghart/2009/facing-opposition/

Ezekiel 40 November 28, 2014 1 Peter 5

Ezekiel is now shown a true wonder- the "New Temple". God reveals the details and measurements of the new temple in several chapters of Ezekiel. He is told to "*Tell the people of Israel everything you see."* (Ezek. 40:4). Some scholars call this the "millennium temple" or the "third temple" since it is clear from Scripture that this temple is not the one that Satan will defile in Rev 13:1-10. (http://www.bibletrack.org/cgi-bin/bible.pl?incr=0&mo=12&dy=2)

I must confess that I always get "lost in the details" of this Temple- the emphasis on the architecture and dimensions (including the "long cubit") are mind numbing to me: *"I saw a wall completely surrounding the temple area. The length of the measuring rod in the man's hand was six long cubits, each of which was a cubit and a handbreadth. He measured the wall; it was one measuring rod thick and one rod high."* (Ezek. 40:5).
So why this detail? Whys is God so anxious to give Ezekiel a first hand acquaintance with all these specifications of a tructure that has yet to be built? Several possible answers come to mind: 1) God is the God of detail- He holds in His infinite mind the very blueprint of the universe; 2) God expects His directions- especially the ones so excruciatingly clear as these- to be followed exactly- this is a sort of test of obedience; 3) God uses some of the details as "types" of truths that he is revealing to Ezekiel or will reveal later (such as the entry of the Glory of God from the east- the traditional direction from which God appears (http://zionusa.org/second-coming-christ-ahnsahnghong/where-will-christ-come-to-at-his-second-coming/). 4) God is committed to restoration and recalamation so the true and lasting fellowship can be established (or re-established) with His people.

Ezekiel receives details in this chapter about the East Gate: *“Then he went to the east gate. He climbed its steps and measured the threshold of the gate; it was one rod deep. 7 The alcoves for the guards were one rod long and one rod wide, and the projecting walls between the alcoves were five cubits[b] thick. And the threshold of the gate next to the portico facing the temple was one rod deep.” (Ezek. 40:6-7).* God then describes the Outer Court: *“Then he brought me into the outer court. There I saw some rooms and a pavement that had been constructed all around the court; there were thirty rooms along the pavement. 18 It abutted the sides of the gateways and was as wide as they were long; this was the lower pavement. 19 Then he measured the distance from the inside of the lower gateway to the outside of the inner court; it was a hundred cubits on the east side as well as on the north.”* (Ezek. 40:17-19).

God then takes Ezekiel to both the North and South Gates: *“Then he measured the length and width of the north gate, leading into the outer court. 21 Its alcoves—three on each side—its projecting walls and its portico had the same measurements as those of the first gateway. It was fifty cubits long and twenty-five cubits wide. 22 Its openings, its portico and its palm tree decorations had the same measurements as those of the gate facing east. Seven steps led up to it, with its portico opposite them. 23 There was a gate to the inner court facing the north gate, just as there was on the east. He measured from one gate to the opposite one; it was a hundred cubits. 24 Then he led me to the south side and I saw the south gate. He measured its jambs and its portico, and they had the same measurements as the others. 25 The gateway and its portico had narrow openings all around, like the openings of the others. It was fifty cubits long and twenty-five cubits wide. 26 Seven steps led up to it, with its portico opposite them; it had palm tree decorations on the faces of the projecting walls on each side. 27 The inner court also had a gate facing south, and he measured from this gate to the outer gate on the south side; it was a hundred cubits.”* (Ezek. 40:20-27)

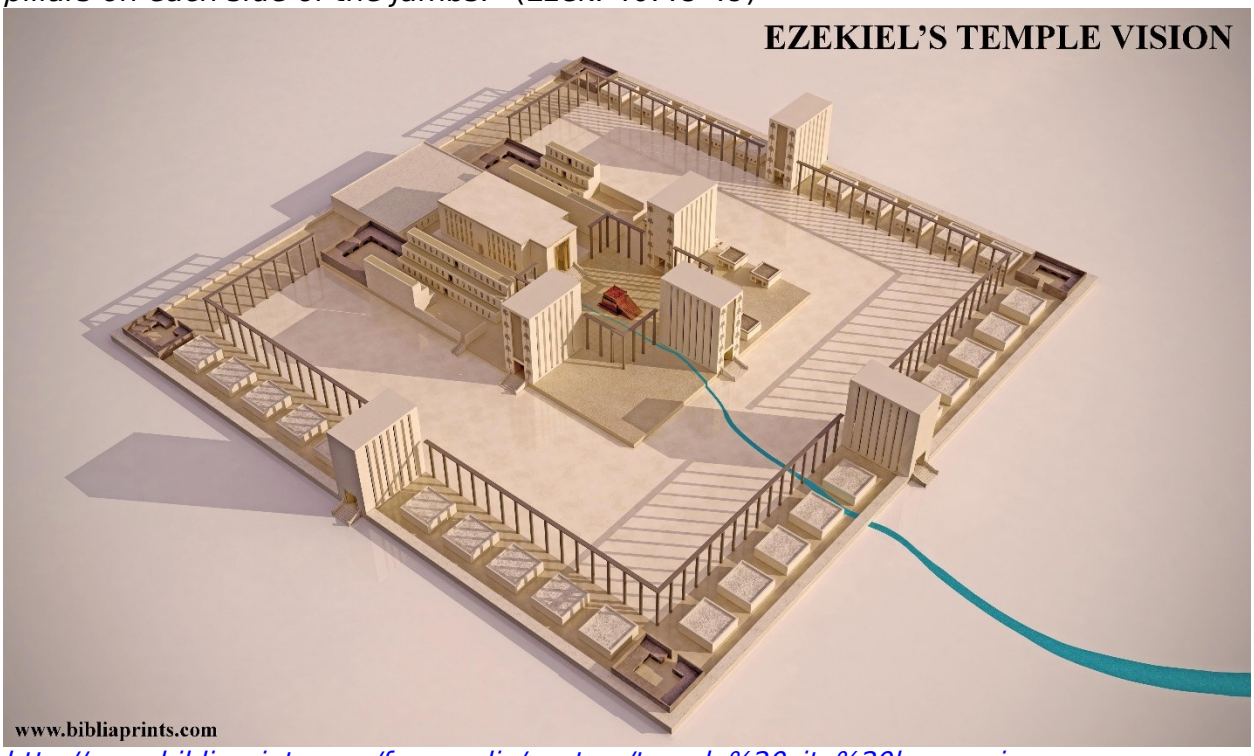
Ezekiel is then shown the gate to the Inner Court, and the Inner Court itself: *“Then he brought me into the inner court through the south gate, and he measured the south gate; it had the same measurements as the others. 29 Its alcoves, its projecting walls and its portico had the same measurements as the others. The gateway and its portico had openings all around. It was fifty cubits long and twenty-five cubits wide. 30 (The porticoes of the gateways around the inner court were twenty-five cubits wide and five cubits deep.) 31 Its portico faced the outer court; palm trees decorated its jambs, and eight steps led up to it. 32 Then he brought me to the inner court on the east side, and he measured the gateway; it had the same measurements as the others. 33 Its alcoves, its projecting walls and its portico had the same measurements as the others. The gateway and its portico had openings all around. It was fifty cubits long and twenty-five cubits wide. 34 Its portico faced the outer court; palm trees decorated the jambs on either side, and eight steps led up to it.”* (Ezek. 40:28-34)

He is then shown the room for preparation of sacrifices and the rooms for the priests:

“A room with a doorway was by the portico in each of the inner gateways, where the burnt offerings were washed. 39 In the portico of the gateway were two tables on

each side, on which the burnt offerings, sin offerings and guilt offerings were slaughtered. 40 By the outside wall of the portico of the gateway, near the steps at the entrance of the north gateway were two tables, and on the other side of the steps were two tables. 41 So there were four tables on one side of the gateway and four on the other—eight tables in all—on which the sacrifices were slaughtered. 42 There were also four tables of dressed stone for the burnt offerings, each a cubit and a half long, a cubit and a half wide and a cubit high. On them were placed the utensils for slaughtering the burnt offerings and the other sacrifices. 43 And double-pronged hooks, each a handbreadth[p] long, were attached to the wall all around. The tables were for the flesh of the offerings. 44 Outside the inner gate, within the inner court, were two rooms, one[q] at the side of the north gate and facing south, and another at the side of the south[r] gate and facing north. 45 He said to me, "The room facing south is for the priests who guard the temple, 46 and the room facing north is for the priests who guard the altar. These are the sons of Zadok, who are the only Levites who may draw near to the Lord to minister before him." 47 Then he measured the court: It was square—a hundred cubits long and a hundred cubits wide. And the altar was in front of the temple." (Ezek. 40:38-47)

Ezekiel is then brought to the portico of the Temple: *"He brought me to the portico of the temple and measured the jambs of the portico; they were five cubits wide on either side. The width of the entrance was fourteen cubits and its projecting walls were three cubits wide on either side. 49 The portico was twenty cubits wide, and twelve cubits from front to back. It was reached by a flight of stairs, and there were pillars on each side of the jambs."* (Ezek. 40:48-49)



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1 Peter 5

The key role of the elders, those who are called to lead and shepherd the church, is described in detail in 1 Peter 5: *"To the elders among you, I appeal as a fellow elder and a witness of Christ's sufferings who also will share in the glory to be revealed: 2 Be shepherds of God's flock that is under your care, watching over them—not because you must, but because you are willing, as God wants you to be; not pursuing dishonest gain, but eager to serve; 3 not lording it over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock. 4 And when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the crown of glory that will never fade away. 5 In the same way, you who are younger, submit yourselves to your elders. All of you, clothe yourselves with humility toward one another, because,*
"God opposes the proud
but shows favor to the humble."
6 Humble yourselves, therefore, under God's mighty hand, that he may lift you up in due time. 7 Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you." (1 Pet. 5:1-6). Peter identified himself as an elder, as he addresses those leading the church as "fellow elders" (verse 1). The ruling and teaching elder office is an established part of many Protestant churches, especially the Prebyterian and Reformed churches. The office of elder is not of glory and privilege but of service (verses 2-5).

Peter then urges those in the family of God to be "alert"- one of the favorite tricks of the Deceiver is to lull the saints into believeing that he is not rpesent or not even "real"- that is when our guard is down and damage can be done by the Evil One: *"Be alert and of sober mind. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour. 9 Resist him, standing firm in the faith, because you know that the family of believers throughout the world is undergoing the same kind of sufferings. 10 And the God of all grace, who called you to his eternal glory in Christ, after you have suffered a little while, will himself restore you and make you strong, firm and steadfast. 11 To him be the power for ever and ever. Amen."* (1 Peter 5:8-11)

Peter then gives his final greetings, acknowledging his coworkers, especially Silas who was instrumental in both the writing and transmittal of this letter: *"With the help of Silas, whom I regard as a faithful brother, I have written to you briefly, encouraging you and testifying that this is the true grace of God. Stand fast in it. 13 She who is in Babylon, chosen together with you, sends you her greetings, and so does my son Mark. 14 Greet one another with a kiss of love.*
Peace to all of you who are in Christ." (1 Peter 5:12-14)

Ezekiel 41-42 November 29, 2014 2 Peter 1

The inner sanctuary and the rooms for the priests are now described and shown to Ezekiel: *"Then he went into the inner sanctuary and measured the jambs of the entrance; each was two cubits wide. The entrance was six cubits wide, and the projecting walls on each side of it were seven cubits wide. 4 And he measured the length of the inner sanctuary; it was twenty cubits, and its width was twenty cubits across the end of the main hall. He said to me, "This is the Most Holy Place."* (Ezek. 41:3-4) More detail is then given of the construction and appearance of the Most Holy Place: *"The main hall had a rectangular doorframe, and the one at the front of*

the Most Holy Place was similar. 22 There was a wooden altar three cubits high and two cubits square[m]; its corners, its base and its sides were of wood. The man said to me, "This is the table that is before the Lord." 23 Both the main hall and the Most Holy Place had double doors. 24 Each door had two leaves—two hinged leaves for each door. 25 And on the doors of the main hall were carved cherubim and palm trees like those carved on the walls, and there was a wooden overhang on the front of the portico. 26 On the sidewalls of the portico were narrow windows with palm trees carved on each side. The side rooms of the temple also had overhangs." (Ezek. 41:21-26)

Then the rooms for the priests and the East gate area are described in great detail: Then he said to me, *"The north and south rooms facing the temple courtyard are the priests' rooms, where the priests who approach the Lord will eat the most holy offerings. There they will put the most holy offerings—the grain offerings, the sin offerings[t] and the guilt offerings—for the place is holy. 14 Once the priests enter the holy precincts, they are not to go into the outer court until they leave behind the garments in which they minister, for these are holy. They are to put on other clothes before they go near the places that are for the people."*

15 When he had finished measuring what was inside the temple area, he led me out by the east gate and measured the area all around: 16 He measured the east side with the measuring rod; it was five hundred cubits. 17 He measured the north side; it was five hundred cubits by the measuring rod. 18 He measured the south side; it was five hundred cubits by the measuring rod. 19 Then he turned to the west side and measured; it was five hundred cubits by the measuring rod. 20 So he measured the area on all four sides. It had a wall around it, five hundred cubits long and five hundred cubits wide, to separate the holy from the common." (Ezek. 42:13-20) The level of detail and specification here is similar in many ways to the directions and specifications given by God for the construction and utilization of the Tent of Meeting, a moveable "surrogate" of the final temple to Solomon (please see http://www.compellingtruth.org/tent-of-meeting.html.

2 Peter 1

My "Cliff's Notes" guide to Bible study tells me that 1 Peter is primarily concerned with threats from outside the church, which in that time included active persecution, and 2 Peter is about the threat within the church from heresy and false teachings. (please see http://www.cliffsnotes.com/literature/n/new-testament-of-the-bible/summary-and-analysis/open-letters-to-the-churches) This broad brush summary does not include the subtlety and richness found in each book, which are certainly worthy of deep and repeated study and application. 2 Peter was written to reassure the readers of this letter that jesus was indeed coming again, despite the sneers and criticisms of "scoffers" and other doubters. (2 Peter 3:3-10).

2 Peter 1 begins with a greeting and identification of the author of this letter as Simon Peter the apostle. Higher critics, of course, dispute this authorship: *"Most biblical scholars have concluded Peter is not the author, and consider the epistle pseudepigraphical. Reasons for this include its linguistic differences from 1 Peter, its apparent use of Jude, possible allusions to 2nd-century gnosticism, encouragement*

in the wake of a delayed parousia, and weak external support." (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Second_Epistle_of_Peter) quoting both Bart Ehrman and Raymond Brown -Brown, Raymond E., Introduction to the New Testament, Anchor Bible, 1997, ISBN 0-385-24767-2. p. 767 "the pseudonymity of II Pet is more certain than that of any other NT work." -Erhman, Bart (2005). Misquoting Jesus: The Story Behind Who Changed the Bible and Why. Harper Collins. p. 31 "Evidence comes in the final book of the New Testament to be written, 2 Peter, a book that most critical scholars believe was not actually written by Peter but by one of his followers, pseudonymously.". ISBN 978-0-06-182514-9." The pseudopigripha referred to here (scholars just LOVE words like "pseudopigripha") are described in Wikipedia as: *Pseudepigrapha (also Anglicized as "pseudepigraph" or "pseudepigraphs") are falsely attributed works, texts whose claimed author is represented by a separate author, or a work "whose real author attributed it to a figure of the past."[1] The word "pseudepigrapha" (from the Greek: ψευδής, pseudes, "false" and ἐπιγραφή, epigraphē, "name" or "inscription" or "ascription"; thus when taken together it means "false superscription or title";[2] see the related epigraphy) is the plural of "pseudepigraphon" (sometimes Latinized as "pseudepigraphum").Pseudepigraphy covers the false ascription of names of authors to works, even to authentic works that make no such claim within their text. Thus a widely accepted but an incorrect attribution of authorship may make a completely authentic text pseudepigraphical. Assessing the actual writer of a text locates questions of pseudepigraphical attribution within the discipline of literary criticism.*

I think it would be fun to tweak these self important critics by defining "pseudopigripha" as the "writings from false pigs", but I digress!

The letter begins this way: *"Simon Peter, a servant and apostle of Jesus Christ, To those who through the righteousness of our God and Savior Jesus Christ have received a faith as precious as ours: 2 Grace and peace be yours in abundance through the knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord."* (2 Peter 1:1-2) In a broad and sweeping description, Peter leads us down the spiritually logical progression from salvation to living the kingdom life. The language here is noticeably Calvinistic "confirm your calling and election" (verse 10), etc.: *"His divine power has given us everything we need for a godly life through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness. 4 Through these he has given us his very great and precious promises, so that through them you may participate in the divine nature, having escaped the corruption in the world caused by evil desires.5 For this very reason, make every effort to add to your faith goodness; and to goodness, knowledge; 6 and to knowledge, self-control; and to self-control, perseverance; and to perseverance, godliness; 7 and to godliness, mutual affection; and to mutual affection, love. 8 For if you possess these qualities in increasing measure, they will keep you from being ineffective and unproductive in your knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. 9 But whoever does not have them is nearsighted and blind, forgetting that they have been cleansed from their past sins.10 Therefore, my brothers and sisters,[a] make every effort to confirm your calling and election. For if you do these things, you will never stumble, 11 and you will receive a rich welcome into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ."* (2 Peter 1:3-11).

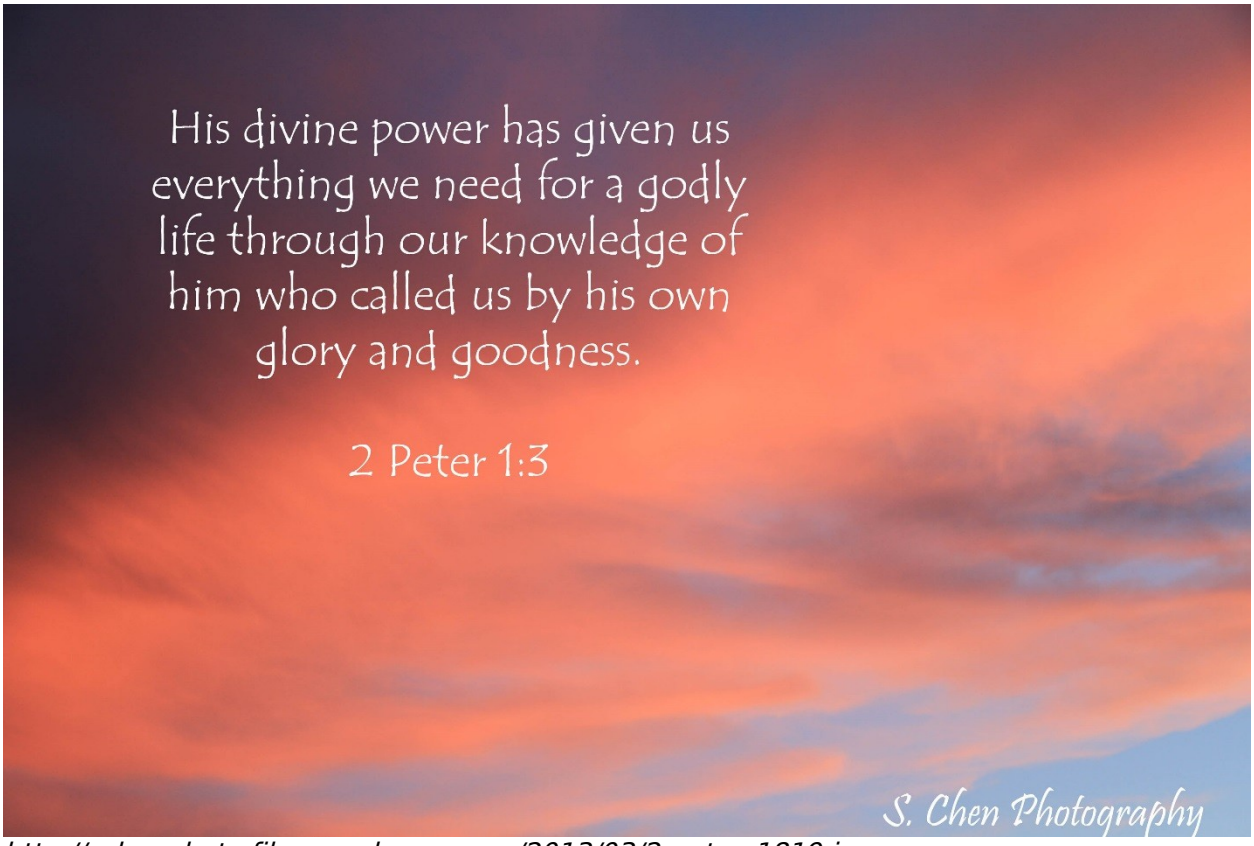
So the progression here is faith to goodness, goodness to knowledge, knowledge to self-control, self control to perseverance, and perseverance to godliness. Most of

our lives are not caharacterized by such a simple progression- the life of the believer is multifaceted and complex- we progress in one area, and often regress in another. It is a messy progression at best!

Peter then addresse what appears to be a burning issue in the church. Many believed that Jesus' coming again was an event that would happen very soon after His ascension. The fact that "this generation" had begun to pass away without the second coming (please see http://www.gotquestions.org/this-generation-not-pass.html) was a source of criticism and in some cases weakening of faith and belief in the body. Peter addresses this head on- they were eye witnesses to Jesus' ascension and promises, and the truth had been given to them on Godly- not human- authority: *"So I will always remind you of these things, even though you know them and are firmly established in the truth you now have. 13 I think it is right to refresh your memory as long as I live in the tent of this body, 14 because I know that I will soon put it aside, as our Lord Jesus Christ has made clear to me. 15 And I will make every effort to see that after my departure you will always be able to remember these things.*

16 For we did not follow cleverly devised stories when we told you about the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ in power, but we were eyewitnesses of his majesty. 17 He received honor and glory from God the Father when the voice came to him from the Majestic Glory, saying, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased." 18 We ourselves heard this voice that came from heaven when we were with him on the sacred mountain.

19 We also have the prophetic message as something completely reliable, and you will do well to pay attention to it, as to a light shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts. 20 Above all, you must understand that no prophecy of Scripture came about by the prophet's own interpretation of things. 21 For prophecy never had its origin in the human will, but prophets, though human, spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit." (2 Peter 1:12-21) The fact that we don't understand or agree with God's timeline for events does not diminish the authority or truth of God's timeline for us! Peter heard God's words "on the mountain" (Matthew 17:1–9, Mark 9:2-8, Luke 9:28–36) at the Transfiguration, and he believed God's words to be true and authoritative, and life changing!



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Ezekiel 43-44 November 30, 2014 2 Peter 2

The Glory of the Lord returns! This Glory led Israel through the wilderness, and inhabited the Temple that Solomon built. The sound of God's voice was like "rushing waters" (verse 2) and the Spirit of God lifts Ezekiel up and places him in the center of the action: *"Then the man brought me to the gate facing east, 2 and I saw the glory of the God of Israel coming from the east. His voice was like the roar of rushing waters, and the land was radiant with his glory. 3 The vision I saw was like the vision I had seen when he came to destroy the city and like the visions I had seen by the Kebar River, and I fell facedown. 4 The glory of the Lord entered the temple through the gate facing east. 5 Then the Spirit lifted me up and brought me into the inner court, and the glory of the Lord filled the temple."* (Ezek. 43:1-5) The closes approximation I can make to the sound of God's voice was the thunderous roar I experienced when visiting Niagara Falls- what an overpowering and mighty sound!

Then God promises to dwell in this Temple "forever", suggesting strongly that this is a temple in the New Heaven and Earth we see in Revelation 21, that is, a temple in eternity itself: "While the man was standing beside me, I heard someone speaking to me from inside the temple. 7 He said: *"Son of man, this is the place of my throne and the place for the soles of my feet. This is where I will live among the Israelites forever. The people of Israel will never again defile my holy name—neither they nor their kings—by their prostitution and the funeral offerings for their kings at their death. 8 When they placed their threshold next to my threshold and their doorposts*

beside my doorposts, with only a wall between me and them, they defiled my holy name by their detestable practices. So I destroyed them in my anger. 9 Now let them put away from me their prostitution and the funeral offerings for their kings, and I will live among them forever. 10 "Son of man, describe the temple to the people of Israel, that they may be ashamed of their sins. Let them consider its perfection, 11 and if they are ashamed of all they have done, make known to them the design of the temple—its arrangement, its exits and entrances—its whole design and all its regulations and laws. Write these down before them so that they may be faithful to its design and follow all its regulations." (Ezek. 43:6-11)

Only true and faithful worship will be permitted in this new Temple. Specifications for the type and order of sacrifice are given in great detail: *"Then he said to me, "Son of man, this is what the Sovereign Lord says: These will be the regulations for sacrificing burnt offerings and splashing blood against the altar when it is built: 19 You are to give a young bull as a sin offering[l] to the Levitical priests of the family of Zadok, who come near to minister before me, declares the Sovereign Lord. 20 You are to take some of its blood and put it on the four horns of the altar and on the four corners of the upper ledge and all around the rim, and so purify the altar and make atonement for it. 21 You are to take the bull for the sin offering and burn it in the designated part of the temple area outside the sanctuary. 22 "On the second day you are to offer a male goat without defect for a sin offering, and the altar is to be purified as it was purified with the bull. 23 When you have finished purifying it, you are to offer a young bull and a ram from the flock, both without defect. 24 You are to offer them before the Lord, and the priests are to sprinkle salt on them and sacrifice them as a burnt offering to the Lord. 25 "For seven days you are to provide a male goat daily for a sin offering; you are also to provide a young bull and a ram from the flock, both without defect. 26 For seven days they are to make atonement for the altar and cleanse it; thus they will dedicate it. 27 At the end of these days, from the eighth day on, the priests are to present your burnt offerings and fellowship offerings on the altar. Then I will accept you, declares the Sovereign Lord."* (Ezek. 43:18-27).

The priesthood is restored, but only those descendants of Zadok are to be in any high office of the priesthood. This was due primarily to the gross disobedience of most of the Levites*: "'The Levites who went far from me when Israel went astray and who wandered from me after their idols must bear the consequences of their sin. 11 They may serve in my sanctuary, having charge of the gates of the temple and serving in it; they may slaughter the burnt offerings and sacrifices for the people and stand before the people and serve them. 12 But because they served them in the presence of their idols and made the people of Israel fall into sin, therefore I have sworn with uplifted hand that they must bear the consequences of their sin, declares the Sovereign Lord. 13 They are not to come near to serve me as priests or come near any of my holy things or my most holy offerings; they must bear the shame of their detestable practices. 14 And I will appoint them to guard the temple for all the work that is to be done in it.But the Levitical priests, who are descendants of Zadok and who guarded my sanctuary when the Israelites went astray from me, are to come near to minister before me; they are to stand before me to offer sacrifices of fat and blood, declares the Sovereign Lord. 16 They alone are to enter my sanctuary; they alone are to come near my table to minister before me and serve me as guards. 17 "'When they enter the gates of the inner court, they*

are to wear linen clothes; they must not wear any woolen garment while ministering at the gates of the inner court or inside the temple. 18 They are to wear linen turbans on their heads and linen undergarments around their waists. They must not wear anything that makes them perspire. 19 When they go out into the outer court where the people are, they are to take off the clothes they have been ministering in and are to leave them in the sacred rooms, and put on other clothes, so that the people are not consecrated through contact with their garments." (Ezek. 44:10-19)

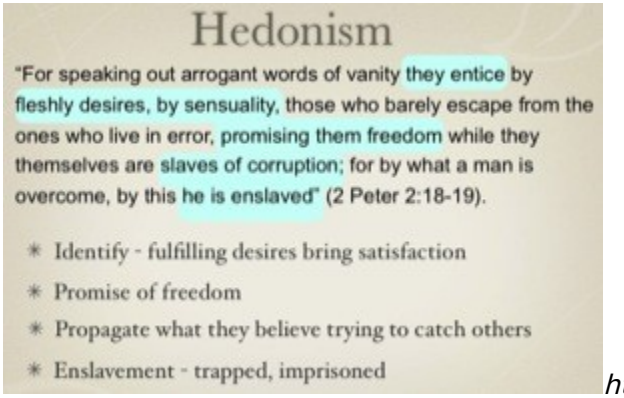
Just as in the established pattern of the earthly priesthood, these priests are not to have an inheritance other that the Lord Himself*: "'I am to be the only inheritance the priests have. You are to give them no possession in Israel; I will be their possession. 29 They will eat the grain offerings, the sin offerings and the guilt offerings; and everything in Israel devoted[n] to the Lord will belong to them. 30 The best of all the firstfruits and of all your special gifts will belong to the priests. You are to give them the first portion of your ground meal so that a blessing may rest on your household. 31 The priests must not eat anything, whether bird or animal, found dead or torn by wild animals."* (Ezek. 44:28-31).

2 Peter 2

The greatest threat to the church has always been internal. Persecution and other external threats tend to move the people closer together as they unite to oppose the outside enemy. The true threat to the church is within- by false teachers and leaders. This is Satan's master plan to destroy the church and its witness- to promote false teaching. The culmination of this will be the Antichrist himself! Peter cautions the church about these evil teachers and leaders: *"But there were also false prophets among the people, just as there will be false teachers among you. They will secretly introduce destructive heresies, even denying the sovereign Lord who bought them—bringing swift destruction on themselves. 2 Many will follow their depraved conduct and will bring the way of truth into disrepute. 3 In their greed these teachers will exploit you with fabricated stories. Their condemnation has long been hanging over them, and their destruction has not been sleeping. 4 For if God did not spare angels when they sinned, but sent them to hell, putting them in chains of darkness to be held for judgment; 5 if he did not spare the ancient world when he brought the flood on its ungodly people, but protected Noah, a preacher of righteousness, and seven others; 6 if he condemned the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah by burning them to ashes, and made them an example of what is going to happen to the ungodly; 7 and if he rescued Lot, a righteous man, who was distressed by the depraved conduct of the lawless 8 (for that righteous man, living among them day after day, was tormented in his righteous soul by the lawless deeds he saw and heard)— 9 if this is so, then the Lord knows how to rescue the godly from trials and to hold the unrighteous for punishment on the day of judgment. 10 This is especially true of those who follow the corrupt desire of the flesh and despise authority. Bold and arrogant, they are not afraid to heap abuse on celestial beings; 11 yet even angels, although they are stronger and more powerful, do not heap abuse on such beings when bringing judgment on them from[d] the Lord. 12 But these people blaspheme in matters they do not understand. They are like unreasoning animals, creatures of instinct, born only to be caught and destroyed, and like animals they too will perish. 13 They will be paid back with harm for the harm they have done."* (2 Peter 2:1-13)

God did not spare the “rebellious angels” and he will certainly not spare these who sow falsehood and deceitful, self-serving doctrines (verse 4).

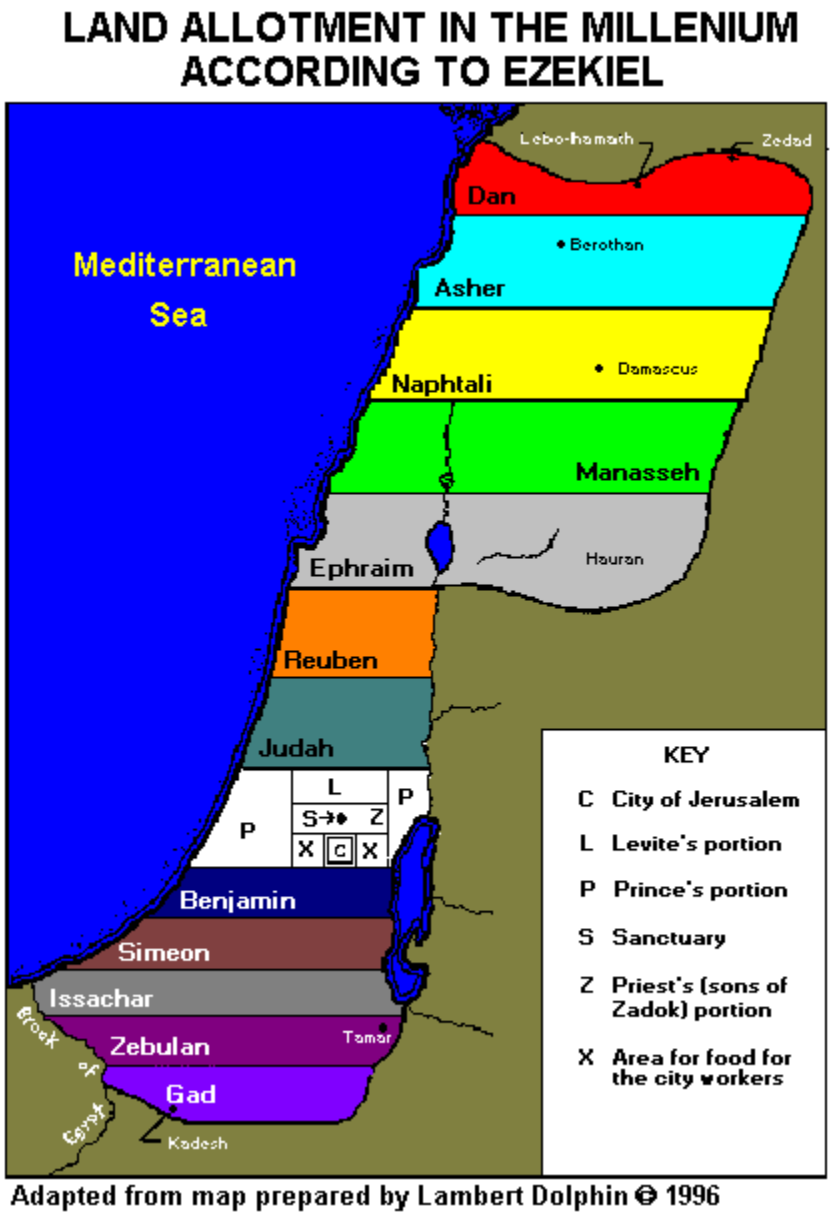
These who are false teachers, preachers and prophets are in darkness. The teaching that emerges from this description is frightening and a warning to those who “assume salvation”- the fate of one who has tasted the goodness of God and then returns to evil is worse than one who has never heard or understood the truth of the Gospel. Similar warning is given in Hebrews 6:4-6: *“It is impossible for those who have once been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift, who have shared in the Holy Spirit, 5who have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the coming age 6and who have fallenc away, to be brought back to repentance. To their loss they are crucifying the Son of God all over again and subjecting him to public disgrace.”* One might ask if these being described here were “truly saved”…surely when the awesome forgiveness of God is grasped and claimed, it is a gift that no rational person would “throw away”. Peter writes: *“These people are springs without water and mists driven by a storm. Blackest darkness is reserved for them. 18 For they mouth empty, boastful words and, by appealing to the lustful desires of the flesh, they entice people who are just escaping from those who live in error. 19 They promise them freedom, while they themselves are slaves of depravity—for “people are slaves to whatever has mastered them.” 20 If they have escaped the corruption of the world by knowing our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ and are again entangled in it and are overcome, they are worse off at the end than they were at the beginning. 21 It would have been better for them not to have known the way of righteousness, than to have known it and then to turn their backs on the sacred command that was passed on to them. 22 Of them the proverbs are true: “A dog returns to its vomit,” and, “A sow that is washed returns to her wallowing in the mud.”* (2 Peter 2:17-22)



http://www.foundationsforfreedom.net/Topics/Disciple/Intermediate/D2_07_Lust/04_Lust-opposite.html

Ezekiel 45-46 December 1, 2014 2 Peter 3

Holy- set apart for something special- reserved for the Lord- tgese are phrases that describe not only the Scriptures, but God’s people as well- IN the world but not OF the world. This portion of land described in Ezekiel 45 has the same function and characteristic- it is “set aside” solely for the worship and glorification of the Lord. These two chapters are covered wonderfully and well in this web page: http://wadholm.blogspot.com/2010/09/ezekiel-45-46-sacred-land-and-days.html.



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The Scripture describes it this way: *"'When you allot the land as an inheritance, you are to present to the Lord a portion of the land as a sacred district, 25,000 cubits long and 20,000 cubits wide; the entire area will be holy. 2 Of this, a section 500 cubits square is to be for the sanctuary, with 50 cubits around it for open land. 3 In the sacred district, measure off a section 25,000 cubits long and 10,000 cubits wide. In it will be the sanctuary, the Most Holy Place. 4 It will be the sacred portion of the land for the priests, who minister in the sanctuary and who draw near to minister before the Lord. It will be a place for their houses as well as a holy place for the sanctuary. 5 An area 25,000 cubits long and 10,000 cubits wide will belong to the Levites, who serve in the temple, as their possession for towns to live in. 6 "'You are to give the city as its property an area 5,000 cubits wide and 25,000 cubits long,*

adjoining the sacred portion; it will belong to all Israel. 7 “‘The prince will have the land bordering each side of the area formed by the sacred district and the property of the city. It will extend westward from the west side and eastward from the east side, running lengthwise from the western to the eastern border parallel to one of the tribal portions. 8 This land will be his possession in Israel. And my princes will no longer oppress my people but will allow the people of Israel to possess the land according to their tribes. 9 “‘This is what the Sovereign Lord says: You have gone far enough, princes of Israel! Give up your violence and oppression and do what is just and right.” (Ezek. 45:1-9) Note that there is to be appointed a “prince”- a kind of high priest, who will rule and prside over all the activities in this “set apart” district (verse 7).

The Passover feast/festival is also to be reinstated: *“‘In the first month on the fourteenth day you are to observe the Passover, a festival lasting seven days, during which you shall eat bread made without yeast. 22 On that day the prince is to provide a bull as a sin offering for himself and for all the people of the land. 23 Every day during the seven days of the festival he is to provide seven bulls and seven rams without defect as a burnt offering to the Lord, and a male goat for a sin offering. 24 He is to provide as a grain offering an ephah for each bull and an ephah for each ram, along with a hin of olive oil for each ephah.”* (Ezek. 45:21-24)

The specifics of the worship activities- including dates and items to be offered in sacrifice, are all summarized in chapter 46: *“‘This is what the Sovereign Lord says: The gate of the inner court facing east is to be shut on the six working days, but on the Sabbath day and on the day of the New Moon it is to be opened. 2 The prince is to enter from the outside through the portico of the gateway and stand by the gatepost. The priests are to sacrifice his burnt offering and his fellowship offerings. He is to bow down in worship at the threshold of the gateway and then go out, but the gate will not be shut until evening. 3 On the Sabbaths and New Moons the people of the land are to worship in the presence of the Lord at the entrance of that gateway. 4 The burnt offering the prince brings to the Lord on the Sabbath day is to be six male lambs and a ram, all without defect. 5 The grain offering given with the ram is to be an ephah,[r] and the grain offering with the lambs is to be as much as he pleases, along with a hin[s] of olive oil for each ephah. 6 On the day of the New Moon he is to offer a young bull, six lambs and a ram, all without defect. 7 He is to provide as a grain offering one ephah with the bull, one ephah with the ram, and with the lambs as much as he wants to give, along with a hin of oil for each ephah. 8 When the prince enters, he is to go in through the portico of the gateway, and he is to come out the same way.”* (Ezekiel 46:1-8)

The “outer” areas are reseved for such activities as preparing the sacrifices for the “inner area” of the Temple: “He then brought me to the outer court and led me around to its four corners, and I saw in each corner another court. 22 In the four corners of the outer court were enclosed[w] courts, forty cubits long and thirty cubits wide;[x] each of the courts in the four corners was the same size. 23 Around the inside of each of the four courts was a ledge of stone, with places for fire built all around under the ledge. 24 He said to me, “These are the kitchens where those who minister at the temple are to cook the sacrifices of the people.”(Ezek 46:21-24). Some of this ‘separation” architecture is seen today in the arrangement of the altar, pulpit and chancel rail of many churches

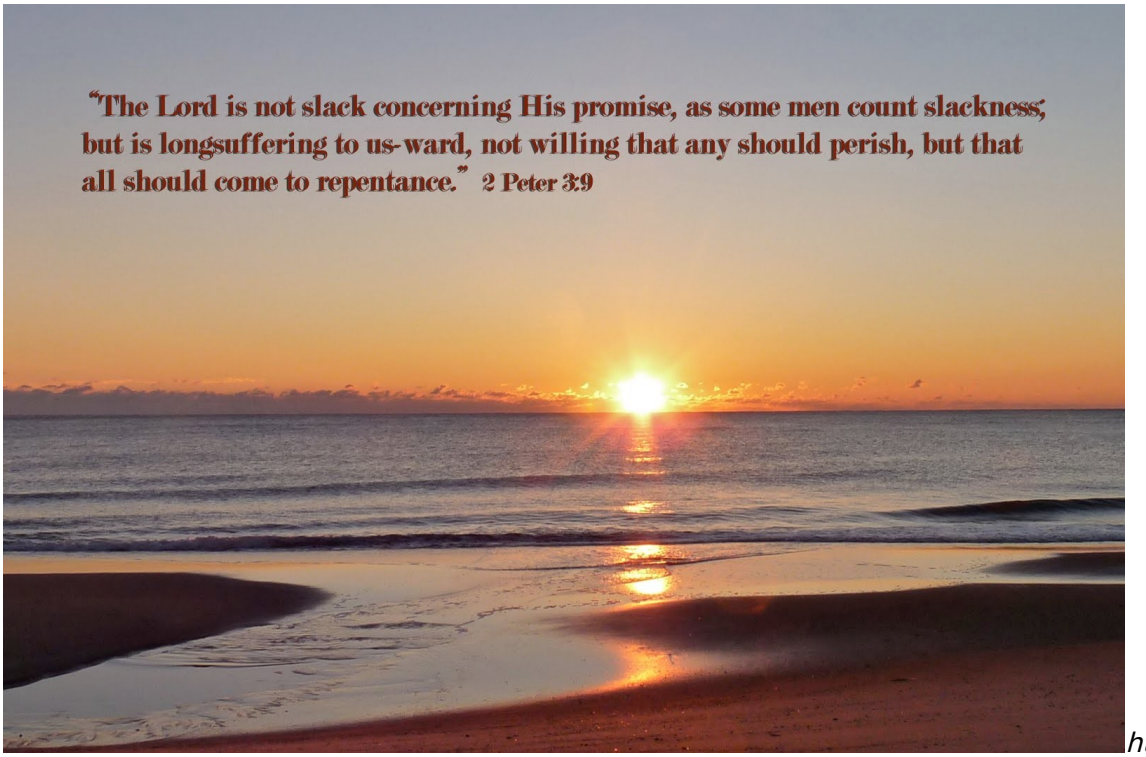
(http://www.patheos.com/Library/Methodist/Ritual-Worship-Devotion-Symbolism/Sacred-Space.html).

2 Peter 3

As if to answer the "scoffers" in a very dramatic way, God will bring about events on the "Day of the Lord" in dramatic and overwhelming fashion. This "day of the Lord" has been described elsewhere in Scripture (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Day_of_the_Lord) This phrase has been used to describe a day of judgment in Isaiah, Amos and Joel (Isaiah 2:12; Amos 5:18-20; Joel 2:1-11; 32). Here the Day of the Lord described God's return to remove the believers and to pronounce judgment: *"Dear friends, this is now my second letter to you. I have written both of them as reminders to stimulate you to wholesome thinking. 2 I want you to recall the words spoken in the past by the holy prophets and the command given by our Lord and Savior through your apostles. 3 Above all, you must understand that in the last days scoffers will come, scoffing and following their own evil desires. 4 They will say, "Where is this 'coming' he promised? Ever since our ancestors died, everything goes on as it has since the beginning of creation." 5 But they deliberately forget that long ago by God's word the heavens came into being and the earth was formed out of water and by water. 6 By these waters also the world of that time was deluged and destroyed. 7 By the same word the present heavens and earth are reserved for fire, being kept for the day of judgment and destruction of the ungodly. 8 But do not forget this one thing, dear friends: With the Lord a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day. 9 The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. Instead he is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.10 But the day of the Lord will come like a thief. The heavens will disappear with a roar; the elements will be destroyed by fire, and the earth and everything done in it will be laid bare."* (2 Peter 2:1-10). As a practicing chemist, I assure you that it takes colossal force to "destroy elements"- these tiny bits of matter are held together with an extraordinarily strong force (or more correctly, forces)- so we are talking about a truly staggering amount of energy!

So how than are we to respond to this coming destruction and judgment, when the very fabric of the physical universe will be torn? The answer is deceptively simple- by leading Godly lives that are in keeping with His revealed will- and to depend fully on Him for everything- including our faith and the allotment of grace he so generously lavishes on us! We are, to put it simply, to be "ready"- we are to live each day as if it were known to be our last: *"Since everything will be destroyed in this way, what kind of people ought you to be? You ought to live holy and godly lives 12 as you look forward to the day of God and speed its coming. That day will bring about the destruction of the heavens by fire, and the elements will melt in the heat. 13 But in keeping with his promise we are looking forward to a new heaven and a new earth, where righteousness dwells. 14 So then, dear friends, since you are looking forward to this, make every effort to be found spotless, blameless and at*

peace with him. 15 Bear in mind that our Lord's patience means salvation, just as our dear brother Paul also wrote you with the wisdom that God gave him. 16 He writes the same way in all his letters, speaking in them of these matters. His letters contain some things that are hard to understand, which ignorant and unstable people distort, as they do the other Scriptures, to their own destruction. 17 Therefore, dear friends, since you have been forewarned, be on your guard so that you may not be carried away by the error of the lawless and fall from your secure position. 18 But grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. To him be glory both now and forever! Amen." (1 Peter 3:11-18)

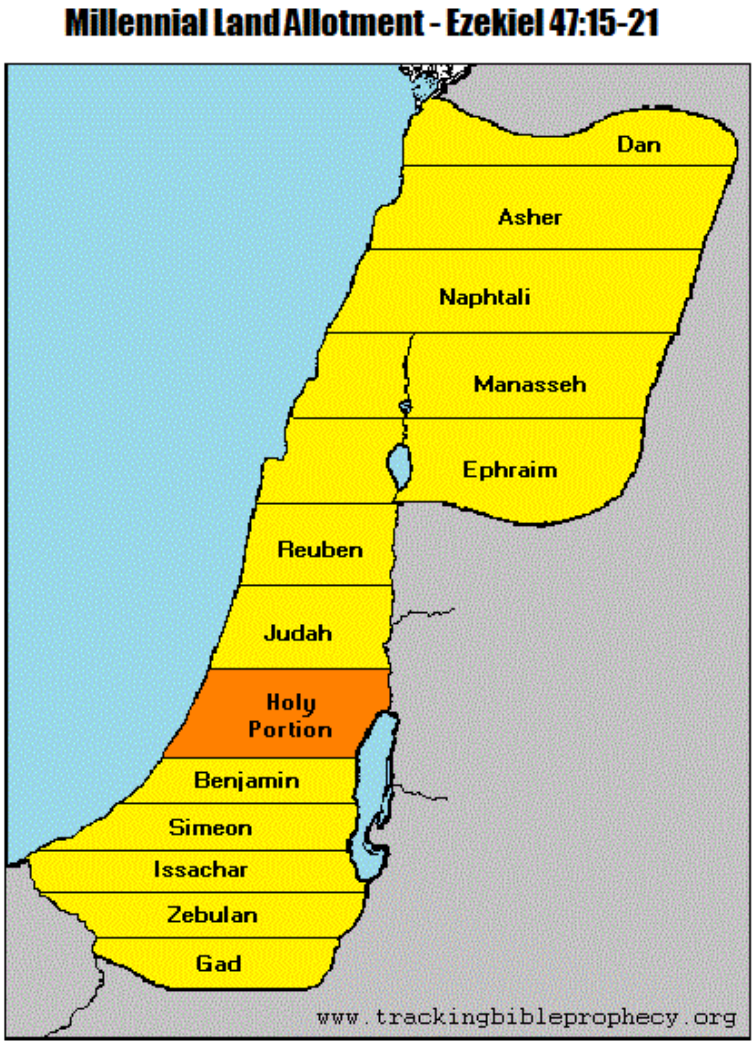


http://pendernews.files.wordpress.com/2013/06/2peter3-9.jpg

Ezekiel 47-48 December 2, 2014 1 John 1

Water streaming from the Temple- symbolic of the source of Life- the Father/Creator. Also we are reminded of Jesus claims that He was the Living Water that would always give us life and quench our thirst. Jesus said*: "Everyone who drinks of this water will thirst again; 14but whoever drinks of the water that I will give him shall never thirst; but the water that I will give him will become in him a well of water springing up to eternal life."* (John 4:13b-14). In Psalm 1 we read these words about a righteous man- *"That person is like a tree planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in season and whose leaf does not wither-- whatever they do prospers."* (Psalm 1:3). So here we have a memorable and beautiful portrait of the life giving water that is ours if we claim it- if we dare to abndon self and plunge into the life-giving water/love/care of God Himself! The Scriptures describe it this way: *"The man brought me back to the entrance to the temple, and I saw water coming out from under the threshold of the temple toward the east (for the temple faced east). The water was coming down from under the south side of the temple, south*

of the altar. 2 He then brought me out through the north gate and led me around the outside to the outer gate facing east, and the water was trickling from the south side. 3 As the man went eastward with a measuring line in his hand, he measured off a thousand cubits and then led me through water that was ankle-deep. 4 He measured off another thousand cubits and led me through water that was knee-deep. He measured off another thousand and led me through water that was up to the waist. 5 He measured off another thousand, but now it was a river that I could not cross, because the water had risen and was deep enough to swim in—a river that no one could cross. 6 He asked me, "Son of man, do you see this?" Then he led me back to the bank of the river. 7 When I arrived there, I saw a great number of trees on each side of the river. 8 He said to me, "This water flows toward the eastern region and goes down into the Arabah, where it enters the Dead Sea. When it empties into the sea, the salty water there becomes fresh. 9 Swarms of living creatures will live wherever the river flows. There will be large numbers of fish, because this water flows there and makes the salt water fresh; so where the river flows everything will live. 10 Fishermen will stand along the shore; from En Gedi to En Eglaim there will be places for spreading nets. The fish will be of many kinds—like the fish of the Mediterranean Sea. 11 But the swamps and marshes will not become fresh; they will be left for salt. 12 Fruit trees of all kinds will grow on both banks of the river. Their leaves will not wither, nor will their fruit fail. Every month they will bear fruit, because the water from the sanctuary flows to them. Their fruit will serve for food and their leaves for healing." (Ezek. 47:1-12). These trees may have a resemblance to the Tree of Life in Eden, since their leaves will serve "for healing".



The from Ezekiel 47:13 to the end of this prophetic book, the division of land into sections- one for each tribe- is described. What is suggested here is the unity of God's people. Historically, ten of the twelve tribes were already "lost"- dispersed after bein conquered. Here we see them rejoined in the Millenium. Ezekiel tells us: *"This is what the Sovereign Lord says: "These are the boundaries of the land that you will divide among the twelve tribes of Israel as their inheritance, with two portions for Joseph. 14 You are to divide it equally among them. Because I swore with uplifted hand to give it to your ancestors, this land will become your inheritance."* (Ezek. 47.13-14) Since a picture or map is so much more illustrative than words, the map depicted above may help us grasp the details of this division of the Promised Land.

The newly divided land is characterized by inclusiveness- even the foreigner is to be included: *"You are to distribute this land among yourselves according to the tribes of Israel. 22 You are to allot it as an inheritance for yourselves and for the foreigners residing among you and who have children. You are to consider them as native-born Israelites; along with you they are to be allotted an inheritance among the tribes of*

Israel. 23 In whatever tribe a foreigner resides, there you are to give them their inheritance," declares the Sovereign Lord." (Ezek. 47:21-23)

God never wastes an opportunity to teach His people- and such is the case here. He orders them to set apart a special section of the land that is devoted totally to Him. This is a significant portion of the land, as can be seen in the map: *"The special portion you are to offer to the Lord will be 25,000 cubits long and 10,000 cubits wide. 10 This will be the sacred portion for the priests. It will be 25,000 cubits long on the north side, 10,000 cubits wide on the west side, 10,000 cubits wide on the east side and 25,000 cubits long on the south side. In the center of it will be the sanctuary of the Lord. 11 This will be for the consecrated priests, the Zadokites, who were faithful in serving me and did not go astray as the Levites did when the Israelites went astray. 12 It will be a special gift to them from the sacred portion of the land, a most holy portion, bordering the territory of the Levites.13 "Alongside the territory of the priests, the Levites will have an allotment 25,000 cubits long and 10,000 cubits wide. Its total length will be 25,000 cubits and its width 10,000 cubits. 14 They must not sell or exchange any of it. This is the best of the land and must not pass into other hands, because it is holy to the Lord."* (Ezek. 48:9-14)
The gates of the New City will bear testimony that God is the God who is uniquely "with us". *"The distance all around will be 18,000 cubits. "And the name of the city from that time on will be: the Lord is there."* (Ezek. 48:35)

1 John 1

First John is a unique distillation of much of the theology found in the Gospel of John. The themes are familiar- light and darkness, life that is eternal and death that comes from sin, and the incomparable message that God has given us in the Person of His Son!. This short general letter is written "…to counter docetism, the belief that Jesus did not come "in the flesh", but only as a spirit. It also defined how Christians are to discern true teachers: by their ethics, their proclamation of Jesus in the flesh, and by their love." (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/First_Epistle_of_John)

The letter/book was probably written in Ephesus at about 95-100 AD. The authorship is traditionally ascribed to be John- the author of the Gospel that bears his name. The similarities in vocabulary and style certainly support this, as well as the undelying theology and experience with the Lord. *"That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched—this we proclaim concerning the Word of life. 2 The life appeared; we have seen it and testify to it, and we proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and has appeared to us. 3 We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard, so that you also may have fellowship with us. And our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ. 4 We write this to make our[a] joy complete."* (1 John 1:1-4). John the apostle had certainly "seen and heard" the Lord- and was in fact part of the inner circle- known to many as the Beloved Disciple.

In a few short but powerful verses, John explains to us- and for us- some of the mystery of the Gospel and the complete righteousness and holiness of God. He also provides us with a practical "help" in our daily walk. Since "all have sinned" and to claim otherwise makes us "liars" we are faced with the problem of forgiveness of

our sins. John's prescription is delightfully simple- and sometimes almost impossibly difficult to do- confess our sins!

John says: *"This is the message we have heard from him and declare to you: God is light; in him there is no darkness at all. 6 If we claim to have fellowship with him and yet walk in the darkness, we lie and do not live out the truth. 7 But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin.8 If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. 9 If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness. 10 If we claim we have not sinned, we make him out to be a liar and his word is not in us."* (1 John 1:5-10). So all of us who are "liars" and "sinners" – which is ALL of us-have a great hope. God will forgive us- for the price of the penalty of our sins has already been paid in full! All we must do- and we MUST do it- is to confess and repent. This is one of the Scriptures I have had the privilege to preach. The single thing that impressed me most about the passage I chose (1 John 1:9) was that the Evil one is working overtime to prevent us from doing what we must do to regain our standing and fellowship with the Father who loves us so much. What a tragedy that the Christian does not avail themselves more this simple remedy.

Daniel 1-2 December 3, 2014 1 John 2

One of the consequences of the "upper class" and "desirables" of Judah being taken into Babylonioan exile was the forced inclusion of the exiles into Babylonian culture. This was a brilliant strategy- assimilation rather thatn ghettoization- and was a direct attack in the identity of the exiles. What little dignity and national and spiritual identity that was left was assaulted almost daily by the pagan culture the Jews found themselves in. The book of Daniel is a description of the successful resistance of Daniel to this "paganizing" effort by his Babylonian captors. The book was originally excluded from the canon, most likely because it is apocalyptic rather than prophetic (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Book_of_Daniel). However, the vision of the nations and battles at the Millenium are important to our understanding of God's ultimate plans. Even if these "end time" visions were not included, the story of integrity and identity of Daniel and his companions would lend the book enough moral authority to be included in Scripture.

The book begins with the selection of Daniel and three companions to serve the king. In serving, they will be encourages to adopt the diet and culture of their captors, and are "re-named" with Babylonian names- further evidence of their attempted remaking: *"In the third year of the reign of Jehoiakim king of Judah, Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon came to Jerusalem and besieged it. 2 And the Lord delivered Jehoiakim king of Judah into his hand, along with some of the articles from the temple of God. These he carried off to the temple of his god in Babylonia[a] and put in the treasure house of his god. 3 Then the king ordered Ashpenaz, chief of his court officials, to bring into the king's service some of the Israelites from the royal family and the nobility— 4 young men without any physical defect, handsome, showing aptitude for every kind of learning, well informed, quick to understand, and qualified to serve in the king's palace. He was to teach them the language and literature of the Babylonians.[b] 5 The king assigned them a daily amount of food*

and wine from the king's table. They were to be trained for three years, and after that they were to enter the king's service." (Dan. 1:1-5)

The re-naming of those chosen to sewrve took place almost immediately: *"Among those who were chosen were some from Judah: Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah. 7 The chief official gave them new names: to Daniel, the name Belteshazzar; to Hananiah, Shadrach; to Mishael, Meshach; and to Azariah, Abednego."* (Dan. 1:6-7) Daniel took a small risk and insisted that he and his three companions not be given the "royal diet", which included foods prohibited for Jews, and instead be given a diet of "vegetables". This may be the first instance of vegetarianism in Scripture! The story is told like this: *"But Daniel resolved not to defile himself with the royal food and wine, and he asked the chief official for permission not to defile himself this way. 9 Now God had caused the official to show favor and compassion to Daniel, 10 but the official told Daniel, "I am afraid of my lord the king, who has assigned your[c] food and drink. Why should he see you looking worse than the other young men your age? The king would then have my head because of you." 11 Daniel then said to the guard whom the chief official had appointed over Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah, 12 "Please test your servants for ten days: Give us nothing but vegetables to eat and water to drink. 13 Then compare our appearance with that of the young men who eat the royal food, and treat your servants in accordance with what you see." 14 So he agreed to this and tested them for ten days. 15 At the end of the ten days they looked healthier and better nourished than any of the young men who ate the royal food. 16 So the guard took away their choice food and the wine they were to drink and gave them vegetables instead."* (Dan. 1:8-16). One of the reasons this was successful was that God had changed the heart of the official in charge of them, so that he wopuld be disposed to agree with this change (verse 9)- thus God is in the business of "changing hearts and minds"- both then and now!

God prepared these young men for the tasks He had ahead for them, specifically giving them the gift of wisdom. Theis was, of course, the preciopus gift that Solomon asked for and was given, to his and our benefit. (2 Chron. 1; 1 Kings 3). They were clearly superior physically, mentally and spiritually to the other "trainees" in the program: *"To these four young men God gave knowledge and understanding of all kinds of literature and learning. And Daniel could understand visions and dreams of all kinds. 18 At the end of the time set by the king to bring them into his service, the chief official presented them to Nebuchadnezzar. 19 The king talked with them, and he found none equal to Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah; so they entered the king's service. 20 In every matter of wisdom and understanding about which the king questioned them, he found them ten times better than all the magicians and enchanters in his whole kingdom. 21 And Daniel remained there until the first year of King Cyrus."* (Dan. 1:17-21)

Daniel's wisdom and his unique ability to interpret dreams was given an early test- in the second year of King Nebuchadnezzar's reign, he was besieged with troubling dreams. His first strategy was to ask the "professionals"- the astrologers, what the meaning of the dreams was: "In the second year of his reign, Nebuchadnezzar had dreams; his mind was troubled and he could not sleep. 2 So the king summoned the magicians, enchanters, sorcerers and astrologers[a] to tell him what he had dreamed. When they came in and stood before the king, 3 he said to them, "I have

had a dream that troubles me and I want to know what it means.[b]”4 Then the astrologers answered the king,[c] “May the king live forever! Tell your servants the dream, and we will interpret it.” 5 The king replied to the astrologers, “This is what I have firmly decided: If you do not tell me what my dream was and interpret it, I will have you cut into pieces and your houses turned into piles of rubble. 6 But if you tell me the dream and explain it, you will receive from me gifts and rewards and great honor. So tell me the dream and interpret it for me.” (Dan. 2:1-6). No pressure there! Interpret successfully and be rewarded, or fail and be cut to pieces and your house reduced to rubble!

The astrologers (and others) failed, and in his rage, the King was about to put all of them (including Daniel and his three companions) to death. God had given Daniel social skills, and he was able to put himself in a position to hear and (with God’s help) interpret the dreams: *“When Arioch, the commander of the king’s guard, had gone out to put to death the wise men of Babylon, Daniel spoke to him with wisdom and tact. 15 He asked the king’s officer, “Why did the king issue such a harsh decree?” Arioch then explained the matter to Daniel. 16 At this, Daniel went in to the king and asked for time, so that he might interpret the dream for him. 17 Then Daniel returned to his house and explained the matter to his friends Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah. 18 He urged them to plead for mercy from the God of heaven concerning this mystery, so that he and his friends might not be executed with the rest of the wise men of Babylon. 19 During the night the mystery was revealed to Daniel in a vision. Then Daniel praised the God of heaven 20 and said:*

“Praise be to the name of God for ever and ever;
wisdom and power are his.
21 He changes times and seasons;
he deposes kings and raises up others.
He gives wisdom to the wise
and knowledge to the discerning.
22 He reveals deep and hidden things;
he knows what lies in darkness,
and light dwells with him.
23 I thank and praise you, God of my ancestors:
You have given me wisdom and power,
you have made known to me what we asked of you,
you have made known to us the dream of the king.” (Dan. 2:14-23)

Daniel then convinced Arioch to take him to the king, so that he could offer the interpretation that God had given him. Daniel is very careful to give God all the credit for the wisdom and understanding needed for this interpretation: *“Then Daniel went to Arioch, whom the king had appointed to execute the wise men of Babylon, and said to him, “Do not execute the wise men of Babylon. Take me to the king, and I will interpret his dream for him.” 25 Arioch took Daniel to the king at once and said, “I have found a man among the exiles from Judah who can tell the king what his dream means.” 26 The king asked Daniel (also called Belteshazzar), “Are you able to tell me what I saw in my dream and interpret it?” 27 Daniel replied, “No wise man, enchanter, magician or diviner can explain to the king the mystery he has asked about, 28 but there is a God in heaven who reveals mysteries. He has shown King Nebuchadnezzar what will happen in days to come. Your dream and the visions that passed through your mind as you were lying in bed are these: 29 “As*

Your Majesty was lying there, your mind turned to things to come, and the revealer of mysteries showed you what is going to happen. 30 As for me, this mystery has been revealed to me, not because I have greater wisdom than anyone else alive, but so that Your Majesty may know the interpretation and that you may understand what went through your mind." (Dan. 2:24-30)

Daniel then gives a detailed interpretation of the meaning of the signs and symbols in this dream. The final part of the interpretation is a description of a land and a people that will persist until the end of time: *"In the time of those kings, the God of heaven will set up a kingdom that will never be destroyed, nor will it be left to another people. It will crush all those kingdoms and bring them to an end, but it will itself endure forever. 45 This is the meaning of the vision of the rock cut out of a mountain, but not by human hands—a rock that broke the iron, the bronze, the clay, the silver and the gold to pieces."* (Dan. 2:44-45a) This description dovetails nicely with many of the images given to John in Patmos ewhen he wrote down his revelations. The king is so grateful that he bestows great honor and distinction to Daniel: *"The great God has shown the king what will take place in the future. The dream is true and its interpretation is trustworthy." 46 Then King Nebuchadnezzar fell prostrate before Daniel and paid him honor and ordered that an offering and incense be presented to him. 47 The king said to Daniel, "Surely your God is the God of gods and the Lord of kings and a revealer of mysteries, for you were able to reveal this mystery." 48 Then the king placed Daniel in a high position and lavished many gifts on him. He made him ruler over the entire province of Babylon and placed him in charge of all its wise men. 49 Moreover, at Daniel's request the king appointed Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego administrators over the province of Babylon,while Daniel himself remained at the royal court."* (Dan. 2:45b-49)

1 John 2

The sin that is in the world, and that is so pervasive, profoundly affects even the believer. The life we are called to live- in fellowship and avoiding sin- is a difficult one without the gracious intervention of the One who loves us: *"My dear children, I write this to you so that you will not sin. But if anybody does sin, we have an advocate with the Father—Jesus Christ, the Righteous One. 2 He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world." (*1 John 2:1-2). Jesus alone gives us the power over sin, and the gift of forgiveness from the sin that so easily entangles us.

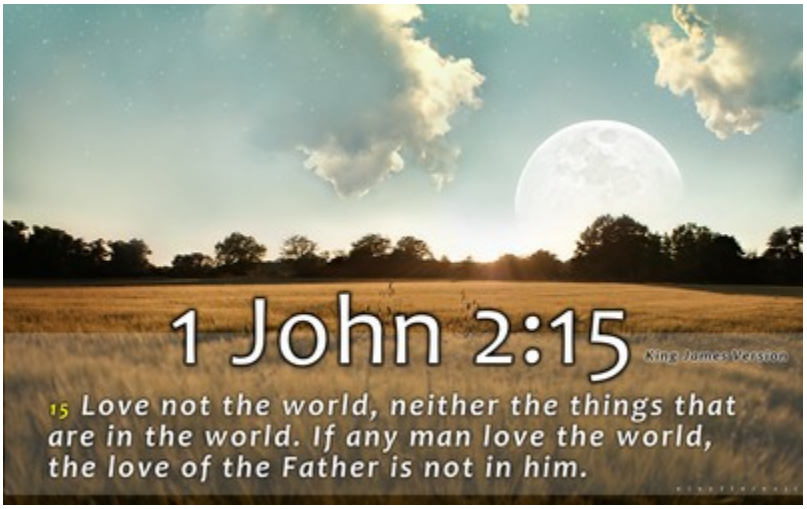
We cannot claim to loive God and hate those around us- this hypocrisy reveals a heart not truly yielded to God: *"Anyone who claims to be in the light but hates a brother or sister is still in the darkness. 10 Anyone who loves their brother and sister[c] lives in the light, and there is nothing in them to make them stumble. 11 But anyone who hates a brother or sister is in the darkness and walks around in the darkness. They do not know where they are going, because the darkness has blinded them."* (1 John 2:9-11).

John then reveals to us why he is writing this letter: *"I am writing to you, dear children,*
because your sins have been forgiven on account of his name.
13 I am writing to you, fathers,

because you know him who is from the beginning.
I am writing to you, young men,
because you have overcome the evil one.
14 I write to you, dear children,
because you know the Father.
I write to you, fathers,
because you know him who is from the beginning.
I write to you, young men,
because you are strong,
and the word of God lives in you,
and you have overcome the evil one." (1 John 2:12-14)

Then we encounter what I would call a "difficult" teching (or doctrine, if you insist)- the tightrope that we must walk between acknowledging that the "world" is good (God told us so at the moment of creation- (Genesis 1:31) *"God saw all that he had made, and it was very good. And there was evening, and there was morning--the sixth day."* -and the realization that the world has been affected by sin and must not be "loved" and given our ultimate allegiance. John cautions us not to put our "heart" into loving the world, because it is temporary and will pass away. The principle here seems to be- love the Creator, not His (good!) creation. Some of the "world" has been marred by sin (please see: http://creation.com/the-fall-a-cosmic-catastrophe). We see this theme in Genesis in that the world, which was created "good" was changed in its character once sin entered the world. The stain of sin reaches even the created world. It, like us, is "fallen" from its intended goodness and glory. So we must be careful with our love and allegiances: *"Do not love the world or anything in the world. If anyone loves the world, love for the Father is not in them. 16 For everything in the world—the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life—comes not from the Father but from the world. 17 The world and its desires pass away, but whoever does the will of God lives forever."* (1 John 2:15-17) John then warns the body of the church to avoid false teacher, who dny the Son and His power and grace: *"I am writing these things to you about those who are trying to lead you astray. 27 As for you, the anointing you received from him remains in you, and you do not need anyone to teach you. But as his anointing teaches you about all things and as that anointing is real, not counterfeit—just as it has taught you, remain in him."* (1 John 2:26-27).

John then encourages the church to "continue in Him"- to persevere even through false teaching, suffering and discouragement. The Scripture is clear- great rewards are waiting for those who "persevere" (please see: http://www.openbible.info/topics/perseverance): *"And now, dear children, continue in him, so that when he appears we may be confident and unashamed before him at his coming. 29 If you know that he is righteous, you know that everyone who does what is right has been born of him."* (1 John 2:28-29)



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Daniel 3-4 December 4, 2014 1 John 3

You don't have to look very hard or far in the Scriptures to find the sin of idolatry. The Pharaohs, desiring immortality, had giant statues of themselves constructed and in life many of them demanded worship. In Jesus' tuime, the emperors frequently proclaimed themselves to be gods demanding-and deserving- worship. Such is the case here in Daniel. Even though the king had heard powerful testimony as to the wisdom and power of the true God, he had an image of hiself erstce in the plain of Susa and demanded that his people bow doen and worship this image.

The Jews in the kingdom were faced with a clear choice- forget everything they had been taught about idolatry, including its cardinal place in the Commnadments and worship the image of the king, or refuse to worship and face serious penalty. Daniel's companions took the latter course, which was quickly noticed and reported to the King: *"King Nebuchadnezzar made an image of gold, sixty cubits high and six cubits wide, and set it up on the plain of Dura in the province of Babylon. 2 He then summoned the satraps, prefects, governors, advisers, treasurers, judges, magistrates and all the other provincial officials to come to the dedication of the image he had set up. 3 So the satraps, prefects, governors, advisers, treasurers, judges, magistrates and all the other provincial officials assembled for the dedication of the image that King Nebuchadnezzar had set up, and they stood before it.*

4 Then the herald loudly proclaimed, "Nations and peoples of every language, this is what you are commanded to do: 5 As soon as you hear the sound of the horn, flute, zither, lyre, harp, pipe and all kinds of music, you must fall down and worship the image of gold that King Nebuchadnezzar has set up. 6 Whoever does not fall down and worship will immediately be thrown into a blazing furnace." 7 Therefore, as soon as they heard the sound of the horn, flute, zither, lyre, harp and all kinds of music, all the nations and peoples of every language fell down and worshiped the image of gold that King Nebuchadnezzar had set up. 8 At this time some astrologers[b] came forward and denounced the Jews. 9 They said to King

Nebuchadnezzar, “May the king live forever! 10 Your Majesty has issued a decree that everyone who hears the sound of the horn, flute, zither, lyre, harp, pipe and all kinds of music must fall down and worship the image of gold, 11 and that whoever does not fall down and worship will be thrown into a blazing furnace. 12 But there are some Jews whom you have set over the affairs of the province of Babylon—Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego—who pay no attention to you, Your Majesty. They neither serve your gods nor worship the image of gold you have set up.” (Dan. 3:1-12)

Remember the astrologers? These were the people who could not interpret the king’s dream. I have often wondered if this slight they received from Danile was a strong motivating factor in their seeking revenge against Daniel’s three companions- Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego (whose Hebrew names were Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah). The answer they gave to the King is one of the most powerful testimonies in all of Scripture: *“Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego replied to him, “King Nebuchadnezzar, we do not need to defend ourselves before you in this matter. 17 If we are thrown into the blazing furnace, the God we serve is able to deliver us from it, and he will deliver us[c] from Your Majesty’s hand. 18 But even if he does not, we want you to know, Your Majesty, that we will not serve your gods or worship the image of gold you have set up.”* (Dan. 3:16-18). They believed God could save them, that he had the power to do so against almost unbelievable odds, yet their faith was so strong that they stood firm “even if He does not”! God used this circumstance to make powerful witness – and the best was yet to come!

They furnace they were thrown into was so hot it killed the soldiers that were administering this terrible punishment! Yet to the amazement of the King, they three faithful men were unharmed by the fire. A fourth person was seen in the furnace with them, which some feel is a preincarnate appearance of Jesus or a type of Jesus: *“Then Nebuchadnezzar was furious with Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, and his attitude toward them changed. He ordered the furnace heated seven times hotter than usual 20 and commanded some of the strongest soldiers in his army to tie up Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego and throw them into the blazing furnace. 21 So these men, wearing their robes, trousers, turbans and other clothes, were bound and thrown into the blazing furnace. 22 The king’s command was so urgent and the furnace so hot that the flames of the fire killed the soldiers who took up Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, 23 and these three men, firmly tied, fell into the blazing furnace. 24 Then King Nebuchadnezzar leaped to his feet in amazement and asked his advisers, “Weren’t there three men that we tied up and threw into the fire?” They replied, “Certainly, Your Majesty.” 25 He said, “Look! I see four men walking around in the fire, unbound and unharmed, and the fourth looks like a son of the gods.” 26 Nebuchadnezzar then approached the opening of the blazing furnace and shouted, “Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, servants of the Most High God, come out! Come here!”*
So Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego came out of the fire, 27 and the satraps, prefects, governors and royal advisers crowded around them. They saw that the fire had not harmed their bodies, nor was a hair of their heads singed; their robes were not scorched, and there was no smell of fire on them.

28 Then Nebuchadnezzar said, “Praise be to the God of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, who has sent his angel and rescued his servants! They trusted in him

and defied the king's command and were willing to give up their lives rather than serve or worship any god except their own God. 29 Therefore I decree that the people of any nation or language who say anything against the God of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego be cut into pieces and their houses be turned into piles of rubble, for no other god can save in this way." 30 Then the king promoted Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego in the province of Babylon." (Daniel 3:19-30). Once again Nebuchadnezzar is shown the unmistakable power and authority of God!

Once again the King has a dream, and this time it is interpreted in a way that predicts a downfall of the King himself. God is using the "fall" of Nebuchadnezzar to illustrate to him that he, the King, is not in control…only God is in control of all things created. The Kings asks Daniel to interpret the dream, and he does so in great and vivid detail: *"I said, "Belteshazzar, chief of the magicians, I know that the spirit of the holy gods is in you, and no mystery is too difficult for you. Here is my dream; interpret it for me. 10 These are the visions I saw while lying in bed: I looked, and there before me stood a tree in the middle of the land. Its height was enormous. 11 The tree grew large and strong and its top touched the sky; it was visible to the ends of the earth. 12 Its leaves were beautiful, its fruit abundant, and on it was food for all. Under it the wild animals found shelter, and the birds lived in its branches; from it every creature was fed. 13 "In the visions I saw while lying in bed, I looked, and there before me was a holy one, a messenger,[c] coming down from heaven. 14 He called in a loud voice: 'Cut down the tree and trim off its branches; strip off its leaves and scatter its fruit. Let the animals flee from under it and the birds from its branches. 15 But let the stump and its roots, bound with iron and bronze, remain in the ground, in the grass of the field. "'Let him be drenched with the dew of heaven, and let him live with the animals among the plants of the earth. 16 Let his mind be changed from that of a man and let him be given the mind of an animal, till seven times[d] pass by for him. 17 "'The decision is announced by messengers, the holy ones declare the verdict, so that the living may know that the Most High is sovereign over all kingdoms on earth and gives them to anyone he wishes and sets over them the lowliest of people.'* (Dan. 4:9-17). Note the first person…the King is recounting this story in retrospect.

The prophecy in the dream comes true, and the King is reduced to a grass-eating mindless animal- only to return to sanity with a fresh insight as to the authority and power of God: *"All this happened to King Nebuchadnezzar. 29 Twelve months later, as the king was walking on the roof of the royal palace of Babylon, 30 he said, "Is not this the great Babylon I have built as the royal residence, by my mighty power and for the glory of my majesty?" 31 Even as the words were on his lips, a voice came from heaven, "This is what is decreed for you, King Nebuchadnezzar: Your royal authority has been taken from you. 32 You will be driven away from people and will live with the wild animals; you will eat grass like the ox. Seven times will pass by for you until you acknowledge that the Most High is sovereign over all kingdoms on earth and gives them to anyone he wishes." 33 Immediately what had been said about Nebuchadnezzar was fulfilled. He was driven away from people and ate grass like the ox. His body was drenched with the dew of heaven until his hair grew like the feathers of an eagle and his nails like the claws of a bird.*
34 At the end of that time, I, Nebuchadnezzar, raised my eyes toward heaven, and my sanity was restored. Then I praised the Most High; I honored and glorified him who lives forever.

His dominion is an eternal dominion;
his kingdom endures from generation to generation.
35 All the peoples of the earth
are regarded as nothing.
He does as he pleases
with the powers of heaven
and the peoples of the earth.
No one can hold back his hand
or say to him: "What have you done?"
36 At the same time that my sanity was restored, my honor and splendor were returned to me for the glory of my kingdom. My advisers and nobles sought me out, and I was restored to my throne and became even greater than before. 37 Now I, Nebuchadnezzar, praise and exalt and glorify the King of heaven, because everything he does is right and all his ways are just. And those who walk in pride he is able to humble." (Dan. 4:28-37).

1 John 3

"Behold what manner of love the father has given unto us…." so goes the popular Christian refrain (https://www.hymnal.net/en/hymn/ns/323). The first part of 1 John 3 reflects this same beautiful truth- we are beloved by the Father, and loved in such a wonderful and perfect way that we (as we yield to Him) lose the desire to sin and the "attraction" of temptation: *"See what great love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are! The reason the world does not know us is that it did not know him. 2 Dear friends, now we are children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when Christ appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is. 3 All who have this hope in him purify themselves, just as he is pure."* (1 John 3:1-3)

John then explains that sin is really lawlessness- not just breaking the law but totally disregarding its authority*: "Everyone who sins breaks the law; in fact, sin is lawlessness. 5 But you know that he appeared so that he might take away our sins. And in him is no sin. 6 No one who lives in him keeps on sinning. No one who continues to sin has either seen him or known him."* (1 John 3:4-6) I struggle with the latter part of this Scripture (verse 6), since I know that I am continuing to sin- but wish (and hope and pray) that I don't. I am reminded of Paul's great confession about his own lifelong struggle with sin: *"What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body that is subject to death?"* (Romans 7:24) The only response I can honestly make is to throw myself totally on the mercy and grace of God!

John then comments on the inseparability of righteousness and right living- the energy and gratitutde that we are given when our sins are truly forgiven, and the amazing and overpowering love that we experience naturally has the consequences of joyour and righteous living. The emphasis, though, should be on the reason "because of God's great love and mercy" for our living and not the "deeds" themselves. No one will go to heaven by elading a perfectly righteous life- our sin nature prevents this entirely. Only the faith we have, and the grace and forgiveness we are lavishly provided, is the bassi for any '"righteousness" on our part- as Paul

says “so none should boast” (Ephasians 2:9). John tells us: *“Dear children, do not let anyone lead you astray. The one who does what is right is righteous, just as he is righteous. 8 The one who does what is sinful is of the devil, because the devil has been sinning from the beginning. The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the devil’s work. 9 No one who is born of God will continue to sin, because God’s seed remains in them; they cannot go on sinning, because they have been born of God. 10 This is how we know who the children of God are and who the children of the devil are: Anyone who does not do what is right is not God’s child, nor is anyone who does not love their brother and sister.”* (1 John 3:7-10)

We should not be surprised that the world hates us: *“Do not be surprised, my brothers and sisters,[b] if the world hates you. 14 We know that we have passed from death to life, because we love each other. Anyone who does not love remains in death. 15 Anyone who hates a brother or sister is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life residing in him.”* (1 John 3:13-15)

Then how should we live? We should live in love and truth, as Jesus did: *“This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers and sisters. 17 If anyone has material possessions and sees a brother or sister in need but has no pity on them, how can the love of God be in that person? 18 Dear children, let us not love with words or speech but with actions and in truth.*

19 This is how we know that we belong to the truth and how we set our hearts at rest in his presence: 20 If our hearts condemn us, we know that God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything. 21 Dear friends, if our hearts do not condemn us, we have confidence before God 22 and receive from him anything we ask, because we keep his commands and do what pleases him. 23 And this is his command: to believe in the name of his Son, Jesus Christ, and to love one another as he commanded us. 24 The one who keeps God’s commands lives in him, and he in them. And this is how we know that he lives in us: We know it by the Spirit he gave us.” (1 John 3:16-24)

http://23.media.tumblr.com/tumblr_kvwt9vGabh1qzziz1o1_500.jpg

Daniel 5-6 December 5, 2014 1 John 4

'Like father, like son"…or so the saying goes. Belshazzar succeded his father Nebuchadnezzar and continued many of the evil ways of his predecessor. Even though Nebuchadnezzar had been humbled by a descent into insanity and praised the true God, his influence on his son was still basically an evil one, if we can judge by the actions of Belshazzar. The riotous evening of drunkenness and celebration of the "conquering" of the Temple and its fixtures was by drinking out of the vessels saced to Hebrew worship was interrupted by a strange apparition- one that truly terrified the king. "Your days are numbered," the hand wrote- and beltshazzar was understandably terrified at this omen. This is, of course, where the modern expression "the handwriting on the wall" comes from (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_writing_on_the_wall). Rembrandt memorialized this dramatic moment in Daniel with his masterpiece painting "Belshazzar's Feast". (below)

Rembrandt's Belshazzar's Feast (1635)

The Scripture tells the story like this*: "King Belshazzar gave a great banquet for a thousand of his nobles and drank wine with them. 2 While Belshazzar was drinking his wine, he gave orders to bring in the gold and silver goblets that Nebuchadnezzar his father[a] had taken from the temple in Jerusalem, so that the king and his nobles, his wives and his concubines might drink from them. 3 So they brought in the gold goblets that had been taken from the temple of God in Jerusalem, and the king and his nobles, his wives and his concubines drank from them. 4 As they drank the wine, they praised the gods of gold and silver, of bronze, iron, wood and stone. 5 Suddenly the fingers of a human hand appeared and wrote on the plaster of the wall, near the lampstand in the royal palace. The king watched the hand as it wrote. 6 His face turned pale and he was so frightened that his legs became weak and his knees were knocking."* (Dan. 5:1-6) Notice the desecration and dishonoring of the true God by using the Temple vessels for a "common" purpose, and the "praise" of the gods of "gold, silver, or bronze, iron, wood and stone" (verse 4). God was understandably outraged by this sacrilege!

Since the "wise men and astrologers" were known to be unable to interpret such mysteries, Daniel was brough to the king to interpret this "writing". Daniel took this opportunity to remind the king of some recent history, particularly about the history

and spiritual journey of his father Nebuchadnezzar, who had ultimately humbled himself before God. Yet, as Daniel reminded him, Belshazzar had been arrogant, proud and disrespectful of the true God. Now the time had come for God's judgment: *"Your Majesty, the Most High God gave your father Nebuchadnezzarsovereignty and greatness and glory and splendor. 19 Because of the high position he gave him, all the nations and peoples of every language dreaded and feared him. Those the king wanted to put to death, he put to death; those he wanted to spare, he spared; those he wanted to promote, he promoted; and those he wanted to humble, he humbled. 20 But when his heart became arrogant and hardened with pride, he was deposed from his royal throne and stripped of his glory. 21 He was driven away from people and given the mind of an animal; he lived with the wild donkeys and ate grass like the ox; and his body was drenched with the dew of heaven, until he acknowledged that the Most High God is sovereign over all kingdoms on earth and sets over them anyone he wishes.*
22 "But you, Belshazzar, his son, have not humbled yourself, though you knew all this. 23 Instead, you have set yourself up against the Lord of heaven. You had the goblets from his temple brought to you, and you and your nobles, your wives and your concubines drank wine from them. You praised the gods of silver and gold, of bronze, iron, wood and stone, which cannot see or hear or understand. But you did not honor the God who holds in his hand your life and all your ways. 24 Therefore he sent the hand that wrote the inscription.
25 "This is the inscription that was written:
MENE, MENE, TEKEL, PARSIN
26 "Here is what these words mean:
Mene: God has numbered the days of your reign and brought it to an end.
27 Tekel: You have been weighed on the scales and found wanting.
28 Peres: Your kingdom is divided and given to the Medes and Persians."
29 Then at Belshazzar's command, Daniel was clothed in purple, a gold chain was placed around his neck, and he was proclaimed the third highest ruler in the kingdom.
30 That very night Belshazzar, king of the Babylonians, was slain, 31 and Darius the Mede took over the kingdom, at the age of sixty-two." (Daniel 5:18-31)

Those who believe the Bible to be a "series of childish stories" and a polyanna presentation of life have clearly never read the Scriptures carefully. A modern "soap opera" would be hard pressed to match the intrigue, jealousy, plotting, murder, mayhem and pure evil that is presented in the pages of the Bible. Such a story of intrigue and political maneuvering is seen here. When Daniel was appointed a "satrap" (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Satrap- essential a provincial governor) by the conquring Darius the Mede, he was seen as "undeserving" and an outsider by the other appointed officials. After all, this was a conquered Jew! So the plots began to unseat, disgrace and even eliminate him. The other satraps knew of his flawless moral character, so they decided to attack his strength- godliness- and use it against him. Daniel, being a spiritual and devoted Jew, was in the practice of daily prayer. The edict that was passed by Cyrus prohibited praying to anyone but Darius himself (reminiscent of the golden image of Nebuchadnezzar that Daniel's companions refued to worship). So the plot unfolded to "trap" Daniel by revealing his prayers to God and not Darius: *"Now when Daniel learned that the decree had been published, he went home to his upstairs room where the windows opened toward Jerusalem. Three times a day he got down on his knees and prayed, giving*

thanks to his God, just as he had done before. 11 Then these men went as a group and found Daniel praying and asking God for help. 12 So they went to the king and spoke to him about his royal decree: "Did you not publish a decree that during the next thirty days anyone who prays to any god or human being except to you, Your Majesty, would be thrown into the lions' den?"

The king answered, "The decree stands—in accordance with the law of the Medes and Persians, which cannot be repealed." 13 Then they said to the king, "Daniel, who is one of the exiles from Judah, pays no attention to you, Your Majesty, or to the decree you put in writing. He still prays three times a day." 14 When the king heard this, he was greatly distressed; he was determined to rescue Daniel and made every effort until sundown to save him. 15 Then the men went as a group to King Darius and said to him, "Remember, Your Majesty, that according to the law of the Medes and Persians no decree or edict that the king issues can be changed."
16 So the king gave the order, and they brought Daniel and threw him into the lions' den. The king said to Daniel, "May your God, whom you serve continually, rescue you!" (Daniel 6:10-16)

So Daniel stood accused of "worship" and the punishment was mandatory- the King could not change his own decree. Daniel's end was assured- or so thought the accusers. God, however, performed another miracle- equally dramatic as saving Daniel's companions from the furnace- he "closed the mouths" of the lions. Though they were hungry, the lions did not harm Daniel. The king was overjoyed and praised God, and ordered Daniel's accusers- and their families- thrown into the lion's den where they were ripped to pieces: *"A stone was brought and placed over the mouth of the den, and the king sealed it with his own signet ring and with the rings of his nobles, so that Daniel's situation might not be changed. 18 Then the king returned to his palace and spent the night without eating and without any entertainment being brought to him. And he could not sleep. 19 At the first light of dawn, the king got up and hurried to the lions' den. 20 When he came near the den, he called to Daniel in an anguished voice, "Daniel, servant of the living God, has your God, whom you serve continually, been able to rescue you from the lions?" 21 Daniel answered, "May the king live forever! 22 My God sent his angel, and he shut the mouths of the lions. They have not hurt me, because I was found innocent in his sight. Nor have I ever done any wrong before you, Your Majesty." 23 The king was overjoyed and gave orders to lift Daniel out of the den. And when Daniel was lifted from the den, no wound was found on him, because he had trusted in his God. 24 At the king's command, the men who had falsely accused Daniel were brought in and thrown into the lions' den, along with their wives and children. And before they reached the floor of the den, the lions overpowered them and crushed all their bones. 25 Then King Darius wrote to all the nations and peoples of every language in all the earth:*
"May you prosper greatly!
26 "I issue a decree that in every part of my kingdom people must fear and reverence the God of Daniel.
"For he is the living God
and he endures forever;
his kingdom will not be destroyed,
his dominion will never end.
27 He rescues and he saves;

he performs signs and wonders
in the heavens and on the earth.
He has rescued Daniel
from the power of the lions."
28 So Daniel prospered during the reign of Darius and the reign of Cyrus[k] the Persian." (Dan. 6:17-28) So like the testimony of Nebuchadnezzar after returning to sanity, Darius' testimony is the likely objective of this exercise of God's will and power. He desires to be honored and praised before all men- and is worthy!

1 John 4

John himsef lived in the "real world" and dealt with 'real problems". It is not surprising that he would be a veritable fountain of good practicel advice. John has already pointed us to the means to obtain forgiveness of our sins (1 John 1:9), and here gives us valuable guidance as to how to "test the spirits". The spiritual world is not uniformly good- there are "evil spirits", demons and other minions of the evil one whose purpose is to sow confusion, discord and even terror among God's people. Simply being "spiritual" is not enough…we must be able and willing to "test" the spirits to see whether or not they are from God. John tells us how: *"Dear friends, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world. 2 This is how you can recognize the Spirit of God: Every spirit that acknowledges that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, 3 but every spirit that does not acknowledge Jesus is not from God. This is the spirit of the antichrist, which you have heard is coming and even now is already in the world."* (1 John 4:1-3)

The apostle assures us that we already have the victory over these spirits of evil- not because of our own moral power or superiority but because of the power of the indwelling Spirit of God:
"You, dear children, are from God and have overcome them, because the one who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world. 5 They are from the world and therefore speak from the viewpoint of the world, and the world listens to them. 6 We are from God, and whoever knows God listens to us; but whoever is not from God does not listen to us. This is how we recognize the Spirit of truth and the spirit of falsehood." (1 John 4:4-6)

God truly is love, and the litmus test we can apply to our own lives is the presence of the Holy Spirit of God. His presence in us is a clear and reliable indicator that we are in a right relationship with the true God of the universe: *"Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. 8 Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love. 9 This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him.10 This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. 11 Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. 12 No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us.*

13 This is how we know that we live in him and he in us: He has given us of his Spirit. 14 And we have seen and testify that the Father has sent his Son to be the Savior of the world. 15 If anyone acknowledges that Jesus is the Son of God,God lives in them and they in God. 16 And so we know and rely on the love God has for us." (1 John 4:7-16)

Three more very important truths are presented in this short but rich letter: 1) God is love- not God "gives us love", or God "causes us to love", but the very nature, the most real part of God- the very core of the reality of our God is a love that relentlessly pursues us and "bombards" us with His grace. I just finished reading one of the "landmark" books in my spiritual journey- the Ragamuffin Gospel. I commend it to you- especially if you are also a "ragamuffin"- beat up, burned out and tired of trying to "be good". This little book is truly a breath of fresh air! 2) perfect love drives out fear- this is especially meaningful to me, as I often listen to the Accuser and fear God because all I see is my sin- the sin that richly deserves God's wrath and punishment; and 3) we love because He first loved us. We would have no desire or inclination to love, or even have the energy to love if we had not first been rescued from the scrap heap, and redeemed- "bought back" by His love: *"God is love. Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in them. 17 This is how love is made complete among us so that we will have confidence on the day of judgment: In this world we are like Jesus. 18 There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment. The one who fears is not made perfect in love. 19 We love because he first loved us. 20 Whoever claims to love God yet hates a brother or sister is a liar. For whoever does not love their brother and sister, whom they have seen, cannot love God, whom they have not seen. 21 And he has given us this command: Anyone who loves God must also love their brother and sister."* (1 John 4:16-21)

Daniel 7-8 December 6, 2014 1 John 5

Visions of beasts- a set of truly beastly visions. Daniel was given these insights in a "vision" that God revealed to him. The first vision concerned a set of "beasts"- four in number: 1) a lion *""The first was like a lion, and it had the wings of an eagle. I watched until its wings were torn off and it was lifted from the ground so that it stood on two feet like a human being, and the mind of a human was given to it."* (Dan. 7:4); 2) a bear *"And there before me was a second beast, which looked like a bear. It was raised up on one of its sides, and it had three ribs in its mouth between its teeth. It was told, 'Get up and eat your fill of flesh!'* (Dan. 7:5); 3) a leopard *"After that, I looked, and there before me was another beast, one that looked like a leopard. And on its back it had four wings like those of a bird. This beast had four heads, and it was given authority to rule."* (Dan. 7:6), and finally, 4) a truly terrifying beast with iron teeth and ten horns: *"After that, in my vision at night I looked, and there before me was a fourth beast—terrifying and frightening and very powerful. It had large iron teeth; it crushed and devoured its victims and trampled underfoot whatever was left. It was different from all the former beasts, and it had ten horns."* (Dan. 7:7)

In a truly strange interlude, a "small horn" appears and speaks "boastfully" – presumably bragging about its power and dominion: *"While I was thinking about the horns, there before me was another horn, a little one, which came up among them;*

and three of the first horns were uprooted before it. This horn had eyes like the eyes of a human being and a mouth that spoke boastfully.
9 “As I looked,
“thrones were set in place,
and the Ancient of Days took his seat.
His clothing was as white as snow;
the hair of his head was white like wool.
His throne was flaming with fire,
and its wheels were all ablaze.
10 A river of fire was flowing,
coming out from before him.
Thousands upon thousands attended him;
ten thousand times ten thousand stood before him.
The court was seated,
and the books were opened.
11 “Then I continued to watch because of the boastful words the horn was speaking. I kept looking until the beast was slain and its body destroyed and thrown into the blazing fire. 12 (The other beasts had been stripped of their authority, but were allowed to live for a period of time.)

13 “In my vision at night I looked, and there before me was one like a son of man, [a] coming with the clouds of heaven. He approached the Ancient of Days and was led into his presence. 14 He was given authority, glory and sovereign power; all nations and peoples of every language worshiped him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away, and his kingdom is one that will never be destroyed.” (Dan. 7:8-14)

Daniel asked God for interpretation of these “beasts” and God gave him at least a partial explanation of the meaning of these four beasts: *“I, Daniel, was troubled in spirit, and the visions that passed through my mind disturbed me. 16 I approached one of those standing there and asked him the meaning of all this. “So he told me and gave me the interpretation of these things: 17 ‘The four great beasts are four kings that will rise from the earth. 18 But the holy people of the Most High will receive the kingdom and will possess it forever—yes, for ever and ever.’*
19 “Then I wanted to know the meaning of the fourth beast, which was different from all the others and most terrifying, with its iron teeth and bronze claws—the beast that crushed and devoured its victims and trampled underfoot whatever was left. 20 I also wanted to know about the ten horns on its head and about the other horn that came up, before which three of them fell—the horn that looked more imposing than the others and that had eyes and a mouth that spoke boastfully. 21 As I watched, this horn was waging war against the holy people and defeating them, 22 until the Ancient of Days came and pronounced judgment in favor of the holy people of the Most High, and the time came when they possessed the kingdom.

23 “He gave me this explanation: ‘The fourth beast is a fourth kingdom that will appear on earth. It will be different from all the other kingdoms and will devour the whole earth, trampling it down and crushing it. 24 The ten horns are ten kings who will come from this kingdom. After them another king will arise, different from the earlier ones; he will subdue three kings. 25 He will speak against the Most High and

oppress his holy people and try to change the set times and the laws. The holy people will be delivered into his hands for a time, times and half a time.[b]

26 “‘But the court will sit, and his power will be taken away and completely destroyed forever. 27 Then the sovereignty, power and greatness of all the kingdoms under heaven will be handed over to the holy people of the Most High. His kingdom will be an everlasting kingdom, and all rulers will worship and obey him.’

28 “This is the end of the matter. I, Daniel, was deeply troubled by my thoughts, and my face turned pale, but I kept the matter to myself.” (Dan. 7:15-28)

The interpretation given by “one of those standing there” was political. The three “beasts” were a succession of kings, the last much more powerful than the preceeding three, but at the end the Ancient of Days and “one like the Son of Man” (verse 13) who approached th Ancient of Days and was given power and authority- and who established an “everlasting dominion”. Many scholars have connected the apocalyptic viisions of Daniel with those of John on Patmos, writing much later in history, as the scholars believe these two visions are oif the same coming reality that God is revealing separately to Daniel and John. One particular detail that joins these two visions is the “holy people” who will be delivered to the beast for a “time, times and half a time” which some believe is another expression of “three and a half” years the two witnesses will testify (Rev. 11:1-14). Many speculations have been made about the identity of the four beasts/kings, the most popular of which is that the fourth beast is the kingdom of Rome (https://www.raptureready.com/faq/faq541.html).

http://virtual-library.culturalservices.net/webingres/bedfordshire/vlib/0.information_reference/art_gall_fant_daniels_vis.htm From: Antiquae urbis splendor, 1612

We then see another vision given to Daniel, this time a vision of a ram and a goat, also interpreted for Daniel: *“In the third year of King Belshazzar’s reign, I, Daniel, had a vision, after the one that had already appeared to me. 2 In my vision I saw myself in the citadel of Susa in the province of Elam; in the vision I was beside the Ulai Canal. 3 I looked up, and there before me was a ram with two horns, standing beside the canal, and the horns were long. One of the horns was longer than the other but grew up later. 4 I watched the ram as it charged toward the west and the north and the south. No animal could stand against it, and none could rescue from its power. It did as it pleased and became great.*

5 As I was thinking about this, suddenly a goat with a prominent horn between its eyes came from the west, crossing the whole earth without touching the ground. 6 It came toward the two-horned ram I had seen standing beside the canal and charged at it in great rage. 7 I saw it attack the ram furiously, striking the ram and shattering its two horns. The ram was powerless to stand against it; the goat knocked it to the ground and trampled on it, and none could rescue the ram from its power. 8 The goat became very great, but at the height of its power the large horn was broken off, and in its place four prominent horns grew up toward the four winds of heaven.

9 Out of one of them came another horn, which started small but grew in power to the south and to the east and toward the Beautiful Land. 10 It grew until it reached the host of the heavens, and it threw some of the starry host down to the earth and trampled on them. 11 It set itself up to be as great as the commander of the army of the Lord; it took away the daily sacrifice from the Lord, and his sanctuary was thrown down. 12 Because of rebellion, the Lord's people[a] and the daily sacrifice were given over to it. It prospered in everything it did, and truth was thrown to the ground.

13 Then I heard a holy one speaking, and another holy one said to him, "How long will it take for the vision to be fulfilled—the vision concerning the daily sacrifice, the rebellion that causes desolation, the surrender of the sanctuary and the trampling underfoot of the Lord's people?"

14 He said to me, "It will take 2,300 evenings and mornings; then the sanctuary will be reconsecrated." (Daniel 8:1-14). Many scholars believe that the "days" referred to in vese 14 are equivalent to a "year" (http://www.itiswritten.com/unsealing-daniels-mysteries-lesson-8-cleansed-at-last). So these events would take place in 2300 years from the time the vision was given. The interpretation of this vision is also given, along with a warning to Daniel to "seal up" this vision since it applies to the "distant future": *"While I, Daniel, was watching the vision and trying to understand it, there before me stood one who looked like a man. 16 And I heard a man's voice from the Ulai calling, "Gabriel, tell this man the meaning of the vision."*

17 As he came near the place where I was standing, I was terrified and fell prostrate. "Son of man,"[b] he said to me, "understand that the vision concerns the time of the end."

18 While he was speaking to me, I was in a deep sleep, with my face to the ground. Then he touched me and raised me to my feet.

19 He said: "I am going to tell you what will happen later in the time of wrath, because the vision concerns the appointed time of the end.[c] 20 The two-horned ram that you saw represents the kings of Media and Persia. 21 The shaggy goat is the king of Greece, and the large horn between its eyes is the first king. 22 The four horns that replaced the one that was broken off represent four kingdoms that will emerge from his nation but will not have the same power.

23 "In the latter part of their reign, when rebels have become completely wicked, a fierce-looking king, a master of intrigue, will arise. 24 He will become very strong,

but not by his own power. He will cause astounding devastation and will succeed in whatever he does. He will destroy those who are mighty, the holy people. 25 He will cause deceit to prosper, and he will consider himself superior. When they feel secure, he will destroy many and take his stand against the Prince of princes. Yet he will be destroyed, but not by human power.

26 "The vision of the evenings and mornings that has been given you is true, but seal up the vision, for it concerns the distant future."

27 I, Daniel, was worn out. I lay exhausted for several days. Then I got up and went about the king's business. I was appalled by the vision; it was beyond understanding." (Dan. 8:15-27)

There has been an abundance of interpretation of this passage, some very detailed and seemingly authoritative. Scholars, when given the chance, will sometimes interpret and even over-interpret the visions that are described here (http://www.biblesearchers.com/prophecy/daniel/daniel8-2.shtml).

My "take home" message is that God is in control of history, and that he chooses from time to time to send messengers (like Gabriel Daniel 8:16) and visions which may help us understand at least part of the Master Plan. I will leave it at that, because I, like Daniel, become "exhausted for several days" (Dan. 8:27) when I try to interpret such confusing visions and images!

1 John 5

John closes his letter with a series of affirmations and teachings. The first is that the one who "overcomes" (or perseveres) is the one who loves God: "Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ is born of God, and everyone who loves the father loves his child as well. 2 This is how we know that we love the children of God: by loving God and carrying out his commands. 3 In fact, this is love for God: to keep his commands. And his commands are not burdensome, 4 for everyone born of God overcomes the world. This is the victory that has overcome the world, even our faith. 5 Who is it that overcomes the world? Only the one who believes that Jesus is the Son of God." (1 John 5:1-5) The faith that we are given- literally as a gift from God- enables us to live a life dedicated and set apart for Him, and we find that "his commands are not burdensome".

Then John tells us that the authority and power of Jesus are testified to by three signs: the Spirit, the water and the blood: "This is the one who came by water and blood—Jesus Christ. He did not come by water only, but by water and blood. And it is the Spirit who testifies, because the Spirit is the truth. 7 For there are three that testify: 8 the[a] Spirit, the water and the blood; and the three are in agreement. 9 We accept human testimony, but God's testimony is greater because it is the testimony of God, which he has given about his Son. 10 Whoever believes in the Son of God accepts this testimony. Whoever does not believe God has made him out to be a liar, because they have not believed the testimony God has given about his Son. 11 And this is the testimony: God has given us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. 12 Whoever has the Son has life; whoever does not have the Son of God does not have life." (1 John 5:6-12) For a wonderful essay on the meaning of these three

signs (Spirit, water and blood), please see: http://www.fbctopeka.com/the-three-witnesses-the-water-the-blood-and-the-spirit. I am always reminded that the gospel of John calls attention to a specific detail of Jesus' crucifixion- the issuing of water from Jesus' side when the Roman soldier pieces Him with a spear.

The reference above was very helpful to me: *"In 1 John 5:6-12, John tells us that there are three witnesses that deliver the definitive testimony regarding the person and the work of Jesus Christ: the water, the blood, and the Spirit. The "water" (vv. 6, 8) here is most likely referring to the physical birth and life of Jesus, the Son of God (see John 3:5-6, where Jesus equates being born of water to being born of the flesh, as compared with being born of the Spirit, using a form of parallelism). It could also be grouped together with "blood" in referring to Christ's death on the cross, specifically the moment where the spear pierced Jesus' side (in John 19:34-35 ESV, John writes, "But one of the soldiers pierced his side with a spear, and at once there came out blood and water. He who saw it has borne witness--his testimony is true, and he knows that he is telling the truth--that you also may believe."). "Blood" (vv. 6, 8) clearly points us to Jesus' physical, sacrificial death on the cross for us. "John's use of these terms is very intentional--Jesus, the Son of God, was indeed a physical man. He was physically born in the flesh, and physically died. These facts are essential to the gospel message. If Jesus didn't physical live and die for us as the perfect sacrificial Lamb, then we could not be redeemed and restored to God, because we would still be under the wrath of God."*

Jesus was real- he was not simply a "perfect spirit" disguised as a person. This passage in 1 John is specifically written to refute the Gnostics, who believed that Jesus wa "really" a spirit and that his physical death had nothing to do with salvation.

John concludes his letter with some "doctrinal" statements about sins, distinguishing "ordinary sins" from "those which lead to death", and cautioning the church to avoid "idols" or their equivalent: *"I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God so that you may know that you have eternal life. 14 This is the confidence we have in approaching God: that if we ask anything*

according to his will, he hears us. 15 And if we know that he hears us—whatever we ask—we know that we have what we asked of him.

16 If you see any brother or sister commit a sin that does not lead to death, you should pray and God will give them life. I refer to those whose sin does not lead to death. There is a sin that leads to death. I am not saying that you should pray about that. 17 All wrongdoing is sin, and there is sin that does not lead to death.

18 We know that anyone born of God does not continue to sin; the One who was born of God keeps them safe, and the evil one cannot harm them. 19 We know that we are children of God, and that the whole world is under the control of the evil one. 20 We know also that the Son of God has come and has given us understanding, so that we may know him who is true. And we are in him who is true by being in his Son Jesus Christ. He is the true God and eternal life.

21 Dear children, keep yourselves from idols." (1 John 5:13-21).

Several of these Scriptures are worthy of comment: 1) verse 13 clearly states that you can "know" that you have eternal life- a comfort to the believer; 2) God hears our prayers (verses 14-15); 3) we should pray for each other (16-17) and pray that God will restore them; 4) there is a "sin that leads to death" (verse 16); and 5) the world is under the control of the "evil one", but Jesus brings life and (by inference) allows us to live triumphantly in the world.

The "sin that leds to death" is commonly interpreted as "blasphemy against the Holy Spirit" (http://www.ligonier.org/learn/devotionals/sin-leads-death/) . Further explanation is probably appropriate here. My personal belief is that the only truly unforgiveable sin is the sin we consistently deny that we have, refuse to confess or be convicted of, and deliberately and defiantly cling to when we know better. God will never "force" us to confess our sins or seek His forgiveness- so we have the (unfortunate) option to cling to that which will ultimately destroy our fellowship with Him. May it never be so with me or those I know and love!

Daniel 9-10 December 7, 2014 2 John

Seventy years? That's about an average lifespan (three score and ten -*"The days of our years are threescore years and ten; and if by reason of strength they be fourscore years, yet is their strength labour and sorrow; for it is soon cut off, and we fly away."* Psalm 90:10- KJV). How could God possible punich His people for that long? Yet that was the realization that Daniel had as he examined the prophecy given to Jeremiah: *"In the first year of Darius son of Xerxes (a Mede by descent), who was made ruler over the Babylonian kingdom— 2 in the first year of his reign, I, Daniel, understood from the Scriptures, according to the word of the Lord given to Jeremiah the prophet, that the desolation of Jerusalem would last seventy years. 3 So I turned to the Lord God and pleaded with him in prayer and petition, in fasting, and in sackcloth and ashes."* (Dan. 9:1-3). Did Daniel think that God might lessen the punishment and exile if he sincerely prayed and fasted?

God's answer to this question comes from the messenger angel Gabriel: *"While I was speaking and praying, confessing my sin and the sin of my people Israel and*

making my request to the Lord my God for his holy hill— 21 while I was still in prayer, Gabriel, the man I had seen in the earlier vision, came to me in swift flight about the time of the evening sacrifice. 22 He instructed me and said to me, "Daniel, I have now come to give you insight and understanding. 23 As soon as you began to pray, a word went out, which I have come to tell you, for you are highly esteemed. Therefore, consider the word and understand the vision: 24 "Seventy 'sevens' are decreed for your people and your holy city to finish transgression, to put an end to sin, to atone for wickedness, to bring in everlasting righteousness, to seal up vision and prophecy and to anoint the Most Holy Place. 25 "Know and understand this: From the time the word goes out to restore and rebuild Jerusalem until the Anointed One, the ruler, comes, there will be seven 'sevens,' and sixty-two 'sevens.' It will be rebuilt with streets and a trench, but in times of trouble. 26 After the sixty-two 'sevens,' the Anointed One will be put to death and will have nothing. The people of the ruler who will come will destroy the city and the sanctuary. The end will come like a flood: War will continue until the end, and desolations have been decreed. 27 He will confirm a covenant with many for one 'seven.' In the middle of the 'seven' he will put an end to sacrifice and offering. And at the temple he will set up an abomination that causes desolation, until the end that is decreed is poured out on him." (Dan. 9:20-27) Scholars have long pondered the meaning of this apocalyptic vision. Some feel that there was at least a partial fulfilment of this prophesy in the Roman destruction of the temple in 70 AD (http://www.eyewitnesstohistory.com/jewishtemple.htm), others point to a future fulfilment in the Millenium.

The Daniel is visited by "a man" (who many believe to be the preincarnate Jesus) who tell Danile about a great war that is to come (http://www.studylight.org/commentaries/guz/view.cgi?book=da&chapter=010) This reference supports the notion of a preincarnate appearance of Christ by comparing desriptions in Daniel and revelation:

Daniel 10:4-6	Revelation 1:12-16
Clothed in linen	*Clothed with a garment*
Waist girded with gold	*Girded about the chest with a golden band*
Body was like beryl	
Face like . . . lightning	*Head and hair were white like wool*
Eyes like torches of fire	*Eyes like a flame of fire*
Feet like burnished bronze	*Feet were like fine brass*
Sound of his words like the voice of a multitude	*Voice as the sound of many waters*

Other identify this "man" as an angel of highest rank, since Jesus would not need the assistance of Michael to deliver His message.

Daniel is overwhelmed and saddened by all this: *"In the third year of Cyrus king of Persia, a revelation was given to Daniel (who was called Belteshazzar). Its message was true and it concerned a great war. The understanding of the message came to him in a vision. 2 At that time I, Daniel, mourned for three weeks. 3 I ate no choice food; no meat or wine touched my lips; and I used no lotions at all until the three*

weeks were over. 4 On the twenty-fourth day of the first month, as I was standing on the bank of the great river, the Tigris, 5 I looked up and there before me was a man dressed in linen, with a belt of fine gold from Uphaz around his waist. 6 His body was like topaz, his face like lightning, his eyes like flaming torches, his arms and legs like the gleam of burnished bronze, and his voice like the sound of a multitude. 7 I, Daniel, was the only one who saw the vision; those who were with me did not see it, but such terror overwhelmed them that they fled and hid themselves. 8 So I was left alone, gazing at this great vision; I had no strength left, my face turned deathly pale and I was helpless. 9 Then I heard him speaking, and as I listened to him, I fell into a deep sleep, my face to the ground. 10 A hand touched me and set me trembling on my hands and knees. 11 He said, "Daniel, you who are highly esteemed, consider carefully the words I am about to speak to you, and stand up, for I have now been sent to you." And when he said this to me, I stood up trembling. 12 Then he continued, "Do not be afraid, Daniel. Since the first day that you set your mind to gain understanding and to humble yourself before your God, your words were heard, and I have come in response to them. 13 But the prince of the Persian kingdom resisted me twenty-one days. Then Michael, one of the chief princes, came to help me, because I was detained there with the king of Persia. 14 Now I have come to explain to you what will happen to your people in the future, for the vision concerns a time yet to come." 15 While he was saying this to me, I bowed with my face toward the ground and was speechless. 16 Then one who looked like a man touched my lips, and I opened my mouth and began to speak. I said to the one standing before me, "I am overcome with anguish because of the vision, my lord, and I feel very weak. 17 How can I, your servant, talk with you, my lord? My strength is gone and I can hardly breathe." 18 Again the one who looked like a man touched me and gave me strength. 19 "Do not be afraid, you who are highly esteemed," he said. "Peace! Be strong now; be strong." (Dan. 10:1-19). The advice "be strong" is similar to that given by God to Joshua (Joshua 1:9 *"Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged, for the LORD your God will be with you wherever you go."*)

Daniel then thanks the messenger for restoring his strength, as we should always be grateful to the One who gives all true strength and perseverance: *"When he spoke to me, I was strengthened and said, "Speak, my lord, since you have given me strength." 20 So he said, "Do you know why I have come to you? Soon I will return to fight against the prince of Persia, and when I go, the prince of Greece will come; 21 but first I will tell you what is written in the Book of Truth."* (Dan. 10:19-21a)

2 John

What is the legacy we leave behind? The Beatles answered this question is a popular song "In the End" – *"And in the end, the love you take is equal to the love you make"* (http://www.metrolyrics.com/the-end-lyrics-beatles.html). We hope to leave behind, love, strong and intimate relationships that enrich others, and godly children that seve and love the Lord. My greatest failing as a human being has been as a father- I allowed my own needs and overwhelming grief over my divorce to divert my time, energy and love away from my three beautiful children. They suffer beacuse of this to this day. John writes this letter to a "lady" who is unnamed, whose children (at least some of them) "walk in love": *"The elder, To the lady*

chosen by God and to her children, whom I love in the truth—and not I only, but also all who know the truth— 2 because of the truth, which lives in us and will be with us forever: 3 Grace, mercy and peace from God the Father and from Jesus Christ, the Father's Son, will be with us in truth and love. 4 It has given me great joy to find some of your children walking in the truth, just as the Father commanded us. 5 And now, dear lady, I am not writing you a new command but one we have had from the beginning. I ask that we love one another. 6 And this is love: that we walk in obedience to his commands. As you have heard from the beginning, his command is that you walk in love." (2 John 1-6). See- even this godly lady had trouble- only "some" of he children walk in truth. I feel better already!

John's main concern in this short letter is the "deceivers"- the false teachers who spread a version of the Gospel that was neither helpful nor true. Some of them were undoubtedly Gnostics- those against whom John wrote in 1 John (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gnosticism): *"I say this because many deceivers, who do not acknowledge Jesus Christ as coming in the flesh, have gone out into the world. Any such person is the deceiver and the antichrist. 8 Watch out that you do not lose what we have worked for, but that you may be rewarded fully. 9 Anyone who runs ahead and does not continue in the teaching of Christ does not have God; whoever continues in the teaching has both the Father and the Son. 10 If anyone comes to you and does not bring this teaching, do not take them into your house or welcome them. 11 Anyone who welcomes them shares in their wicked work. 12 I have much to write to you, but I do not want to use paper and ink. Instead, I hope to visit you and talk with you face to face, so that our joy may be complete. 13 The children of your sister, who is chosen by God, send their greetings."* (2 John 7-13)

https://www.flickr.com/photos/hilarybacon/3853531990/

Daniel 11-12 December 8, 2014 3 John

I suppose that the "end times" folks (Hal Lindsey et. al.) have had a virtual field day with the various prophecies in these two chapters of Daniel. There are kings,

conflicts, rise and fall of nation states, the whole gemisch. Typical of Daniel 11 is this passage: *"Now then, I tell you the truth: Three more kings will arise in Persia, and then a fourth, who will be far richer than all the others. When he has gained power by his wealth, he will stir up everyone against the kingdom of Greece. 3 Then a mighty king will arise, who will rule with great power and do as he pleases. 4 After he has arisen, his empire will be broken up and parceled out toward the four winds of heaven. It will not go to his descendants, nor will it have the power he exercised, because his empire will be uprooted and given to others. 5 "The king of the South will become strong, but one of his commanders will become even stronger than he and will rule his own kingdom with great power. 6 After some years, they will become allies. The daughter of the king of the South will go to the king of the North to make an alliance, but she will not retain her power, and he and his power[a] will not last. In those days she will be betrayed, together with her royal escort and her father[b] and the one who supported her."* (Daniel 11:1-6). Whole volumes and books have been written in an attempt to "decipher the code" and interpret the end times events that are portrayed here. (see http://amazingdiscoveries.org/S-deception-king-Egypt-daniel-11-commentary) An Adventist interpretation is found here: http://www.everythingimportant.org/seventhdayAdventists/eschatology12.htm.

A whole menagerie of characters is presented, including a mysterious king: "The king will do as he pleases. He will exalt and magnify himself above every god and will say unheard-of things against the God of gods. He will be successful until the time of wrath is completed, for what has been determined must take place. 37 He will show no regard for the gods of his ancestors or for the one desired by women, nor will he regard any god, but will exalt himself above them all. 38 Instead of them, he will honor a god of fortresses; a god unknown to his ancestors he will honor with gold and silver, with precious stones and costly gifts. 39 He will attack the mightiest fortresses with the help of a foreign god and will greatly honor those who acknowledge him. He will make them rulers over many people and will distribute the land at a price." (Dan. 11:36-39)

Daniel 12 includes a new vision, where Daniel receives instruction and some interpretation from "Michael"- this time not a high ranking angel but a "prince": *"At that time Michael, the great prince who protects your people, will arise. There will be a time of distress such as has not happened from the beginning of nations until then. But at that time your people—everyone whose name is found written in the book—will be delivered. 2 Multitudes who sleep in the dust of the earth will awake: some to everlasting life, others to shame and everlasting contempt. 3 Those who are wise[g] will shine like the brightness of the heavens, and those who lead many to righteousness, like the stars for ever and ever. 4 But you, Daniel, roll up and seal the words of the scroll until the time of the end. Many will go here and there to increase knowledge."*

5 Then I, Daniel, looked, and there before me stood two others, one on this bank of the river and one on the opposite bank. 6 One of them said to the man clothed in linen, who was above the waters of the river, "How long will it be before these astonishing things are fulfilled?"

7 The man clothed in linen, who was above the waters of the river, lifted his right hand and his left hand toward heaven, and I heard him swear by him who lives forever, saying, "It will be for a time, times and half a time. When the power of the holy people has been finally broken, all these things will be completed." 8 I heard,

but I did not understand. So I asked, "My lord, what will the outcome of all this be?" 9 He replied, "Go your way, Daniel, because the words are rolled up and sealed until the time of the end. 10 Many will be purified, made spotless and refined, but the wicked will continue to be wicked. None of the wicked will understand, but those who are wise will understand." (Dan. 12:1-10). I must confess that I don't find myself among those who are "wise" (verse 10) because I clearly do not understand much or any of this. I also suspect that I am not alone in this regard!

The final message given to Daniel is important- persevere in the Lord, and you will receive your inheritance- good advice for anyone at any time: "As for you, go your way till the end. You will rest, and then at the end of the days you will rise to receive your allotted inheritance." (Dan. 12:13)

3 John

This short letter was written by John to a friend named Gaius, whom John loves "in the truth". His friendship is close and based on their common love for the Lord Jesus. In this short letter, John addresses several issues: 1) loving and helping others- a distinction not shown by the "pagans" (verses 5-7): *"Dear friend, you are faithful in what you are doing for the brothers and sisters,[a] even though they are strangers to you. 6 They have told the church about your love. Please send them on their way in a manner that honors God. 7 It was for the sake of the Name that they went out, receiving no help from the pagans. 8 We ought therefore to show hospitality to such people so that we may work together for the truth."*; 2) problems arising from those in the church who would "go first" (verses 9-10) *"I wrote to the church, but Diotrephes, who loves to be first, will not welcome us. 10 So when I come, I will call attention to what he is doing, spreading malicious nonsense about us. Not satisfied with that, he even refuses to welcome other believers. He also stops those who want to do so and puts them out of the church."*; and 3) the primary importance of imitating (and living!) good rather than evil (verses 11-12) *"Dear friend, do not imitate what is evil but what is good. Anyone who does what is good is from God. Anyone who does what is evil has not seen God.12 Demetrius is well spoken of by everyone—and even by the truth itself. We also speak well of him, and you know that our testimony is true."*

I think it is an interesting foor note that in this short letter, as well as 2 John, the author prefers to meet face to face rather than expending *"pen and ink"* (verse 13).

This short letter closes with the admonition to *"greet the friends there by name"* (verse 13). The closeness of such a fellowship is reflected in the familiarity of such a close "family". God call each of us by name, as He did Samuel, and we should do likewise in the body!

Hosea 1-4 December 9, 2014 Jude

Hosea's message is centered around the hearbreak of unfaithfulness. Just as God grived over the unfaithfulness of His people, Hosea will grieve over the unfaithfulness of his wife Gomer. He was ordered to marry a prostitute, so some may wonder why there was nay surprise over her subsequent unfaithfulness to Hosea. Somewhat in analogous manner, God "married" His people, knowing how

stubborn, self cebntered and “stiff necked” they were- after all He made them! God’s grief is like our grief- the sting and pain of betrayal runs very deep.

Hosea’s story begins when he is told directly by God to marry a woman described as “promiscuous” and then to have children with her. Each child is symbolically namesd after a different aspect of the broken relationship between God and His people: *“When the Lord began to speak through Hosea, the Lord said to him, “Go, marry a promiscuous woman and have children with her, for like an adulterous wife this land is guilty of unfaithfulness to the Lord.” 3 So he married Gomer daughter of Diblaim, and she conceived and bore him a son.*
4 Then the Lord said to Hosea, “Call him Jezreel, because I will soon punish the house of Jehu for the massacre at Jezreel, and I will put an end to the kingdom of Israel. 5 In that day I will break Israel’s bow in the Valley of Jezreel.” 6 Gomer conceived again and gave birth to a daughter. Then the Lord said to Hosea, “Call her Lo-Ruhamah (which means “not loved”), for I will no longer show love to Israel, that I should at all forgive them. 7 Yet I will show love to Judah; and I will save them—not by bow, sword or battle, or by horses and horsemen, but I, the Lord their God, will save them.” 8 After she had weaned Lo-Ruhamah, Gomer had another son. 9 Then the Lord said, “Call him Lo-Ammi (which means “not my people”), for you are not my people, and I am not your God. 10 “Yet the Israelites will be like the sand on the seashore, which cannot be measured or counted. In the place where it was said to them, ‘You are not my people,’ they will be called ‘children of the living God.’ 11 The people of Judah and the people of Israel will come together; they will appoint one leader and will come up out of the land, for great will be the day of Jezreel. ’” (Hos. 1:1-11)

God then goes through a cycle of punishments and restoration, just as He has with the people who have been so carelessly unfaithful to Him: *“Say of your brothers, ‘My people,’ and of your sisters, ‘My loved one.’*
2 “Rebuke your mother, rebuke her,
for she is not my wife,
and I am not her husband.
Let her remove the adulterous look from her face
and the unfaithfulness from between her breasts.
3 Otherwise I will strip her naked
and make her as bare as on the day she was born;
I will make her like a desert,
turn her into a parched land,
and slay her with thirst.
4 I will not show my love to her children,
because they are the children of adultery.
5 Their mother has been unfaithful
and has conceived them in disgrace.
She said, ‘I will go after my lovers,
who give me my food and my water,
my wool and my linen, my olive oil and my drink.’
6 Therefore I will block her path with thornbushes;
I will wall her in so that she cannot find her way.
7 She will chase after her lovers but not catch them;
she will look for them but not find them.” (Hos. 2:1-7).

God's desire for a lasting relationship for His people is the cause of the punishment, but God is always faithful and usually moves first to restore that which was broken*:*
"In that day I will respond,"
declares the Lord—
"I will respond to the skies,
and they will respond to the earth;
22 and the earth will respond to the grain,
the new wine and the olive oil,
and they will respond to Jezreel.
23 I will plant her for myself in the land;
I will show my love to the one I called 'Not my loved one.'
I will say to those called 'Not my people,' 'You are my people';
and they will say, 'You are my God.'" (Hos. 2:21-23)

Hosea is then ordered by God to restore his relationship with his wife Gomer, and to offer her love and forgiveness: *"The Lord said to me, "Go, show your love to your wife again, though she is loved by another man and is an adulteress. Love her as the Lord loves the Israelites, though they turn to other gods and love the sacred raisin cakes." 2 So I bought her for fifteen shekels[n] of silver and about a homer and a lethek of barley. 3 Then I told her, "You are to live with me many days; you must not be a prostitute or be intimate with any man, and I will behave the same way toward you." 4 For the Israelites will live many days without king or prince, without sacrifice or sacred stones, without ephod or household gods. 5 Afterward the Israelites will return and seek the Lord their God and David their king. They will come trembling to the Lord and to his blessings in the last days."* (Hos. 3:1-5)

God, however, is not finished in His charges against the prople, and the priests who so deliberately misled God's people. The very ones who should have corrected and helped the people to a right relationship with God were guilty themselves: *"Hear the word of the Lord, you Israelites,*
because the Lord has a charge to bring
against you who live in the land:
"There is no faithfulness, no love,
no acknowledgment of God in the land.
2 There is only cursing, lying and murder,
stealing and adultery;
they break all bounds,
and bloodshed follows bloodshed.
3 Because of this the land dries up,
and all who live in it waste away;
the beasts of the field, the birds in the sky
and the fish in the sea are swept away.
4 "But let no one bring a charge,
let no one accuse another,
for your people are like those
who bring charges against a priest.
5 You stumble day and night,
and the prophets stumble with you.
So I will destroy your mother—

6 my people are destroyed from lack of knowledge.
“Because you have rejected knowledge,
I also reject you as my priests;
because you have ignored the law of your God,
I also will ignore your children.
7 The more priests there were,
the more they sinned against me;
they exchanged their glorious God for something disgraceful.
8 They feed on the sins of my people
and relish their wickedness.
9 And it will be: Like people, like priests.
I will punish both of them for their ways
and repay them for their deeds.” (Hos. 4:1-9)

The stubbornness and self-seeking of the people prevents tham from coming to true repentance and the blessings of forgiveness: *“Though you, Israel, commit adultery,*
do not let Judah become guilty.
“Do not go to Gilgal;
do not go up to Beth Aven.
And do not swear, ‘As surely as the Lord lives!’
16 The Israelites are stubborn,
like a stubborn heifer.
How then can the Lord pasture them
like lambs in a meadow?
17 Ephraim is joined to idols;
leave him alone!
18 Even when their drinks are gone,
they continue their prostitution;
their rulers dearly love shameful ways.
19 A whirlwind will sweep them away,
and their sacrifices will bring them shame.” (Hos. 4:15-19)

Jude

Jude is a short “general” letter, unfortunately not much studied or preached from. In this short letter we see several themes of importance and significance in our walk: 1) the influence and negative impact of “false believers” in the body of the church: *“Dear friends, although I was very eager to write to you about the salvation we share, I felt compelled to write and urge you to contend for the faith that was once for all entrusted to God’s holy people. 4 For certain individuals whose condemnation was written about[b] long ago have secretly slipped in among you. They are ungodly people, who pervert the grace of our God into a license for immorality and deny Jesus Christ our only Sovereign and Lord.”* (Jude 1:1-4); 2) the example that God will make of those who are not true believers- either angel or human: *“Though you already know all this, I want to remind you that the Lord[c] at one time delivered his people out of Egypt, but later destroyed those who did not believe. 6 And the angels who did not keep their positions of authority but abandoned their proper dwelling—these he has kept in darkness, bound with*

everlasting chains for judgment on the great Day. 7 In a similar way, Sodom and Gomorrah and the surrounding towns gave themselves up to sexual immorality and perversion. They serve as an example of those who suffer the punishment of eternal fire." (Jude 1:5-7); 3) the dispute over the body of Moses between Michael and Satan, and the condemnation of the "ungodly" who rejoice in evil and despise the good and the truth: *"In the very same way, on the strength of their dreams these ungodly people pollute their own bodies, reject authority and heap abuse on celestial beings. 9 But even the archangel Michael, when he was disputing with the devil about the body of Moses, did not himself dare to condemn him for slander but said, "The Lord rebuke you!"[d] 10 Yet these people slander whatever they do not understand, and the very things they do understand by instinct—as irrational animals do—will destroy them."* (Jude 1:8-10) As a footnote, this is the only Scriptural reference to this battle between the archangel Michael and Satan over anyone's body! 4) the blackest pit is reserved for these that pollute the true worship of the church: *"Woe to them! They have taken the way of Cain; they have rushed for profit into Balaam's error; they have been destroyed in Korah's rebellion. 12 These people are blemishes at your love feasts, eating with you without the slightest qualm—shepherds who feed only themselves. They are clouds without rain, blown along by the wind; autumn trees, without fruit and uprooted—twice dead. 13 They are wild waves of the sea, foaming up their shame; wandering stars, for whom blackest darkness has been reserved forever."* (Jude 1:11-13)

The solution given in Jude is to "persevere" and to rescue those who have shown that the desire of their hearts is for evil and not for good: *"But, dear friends, remember what the apostles of our Lord Jesus Christ foretold. 18 They said to you, "In the last times there will be scoffers who will follow their own ungodly desires." 19 These are the people who divide you, who follow mere natural instincts and do not have the Spirit. 20 But you, dear friends, by building yourselves up in your most holy faith and praying in the Holy Spirit, 21 keep yourselves in God's love as you wait for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ to bring you to eternal life. 22 Be merciful to those who doubt; 23 save others by snatching them from the fire; to others show mercy, mixed with fear—hating even the clothing stained by corrupted flesh."* (Jude 1:17-23).

This short book/letter closes with a triumphant Doxology- God is able to protect, bless, strengthen and keep you: *"To him who is able to keep you from stumbling and to present you before his glorious presence without fault and with great joy— 25 to the only God our Savior be glory, majesty, power and authority, through Jesus Christ our Lord, before all ages, now and forevermore! Amen."* (Jude 1:24-25)

Hosea 5-8 December 10, 2014 Revelation 1

God continues His litany of condemnation and judgment, focusing on the unfaithfulness and arrogance for the priests who insist on theor own way rather than God's way: *"Hear this, you priests!*
Pay attention, you Israelites!
Listen, royal house!
This judgment is against you:

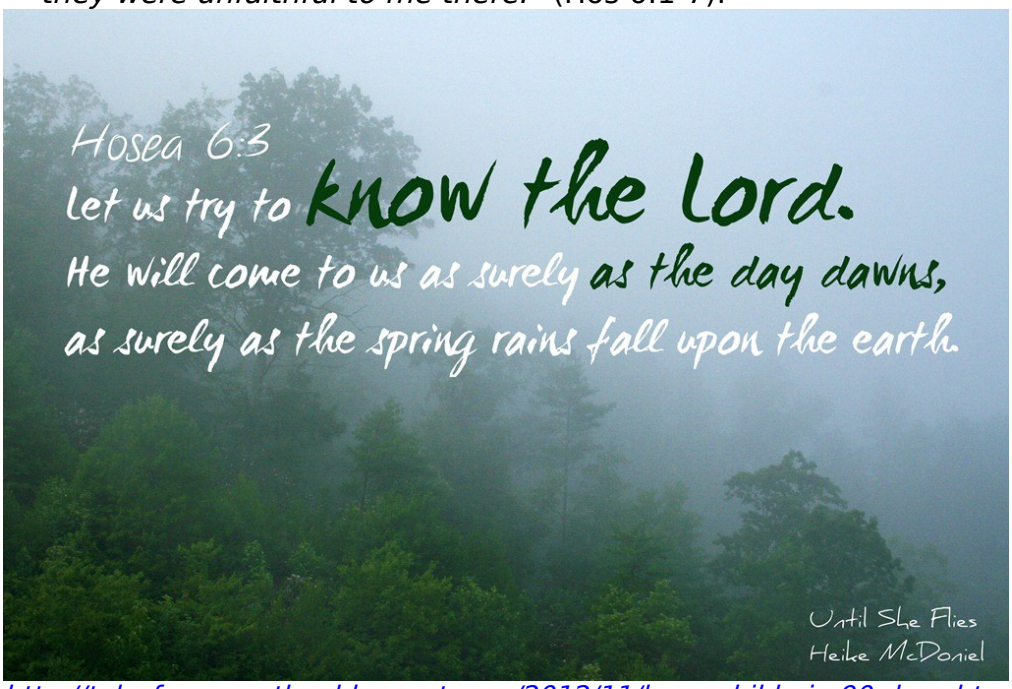
You have been a snare at Mizpah,
a net spread out on Tabor.
2 The rebels are knee-deep in slaughter.
I will discipline all of them.
3 I know all about Ephraim;
Israel is not hidden from me.
Ephraim, you have now turned to prostitution;
Israel is corrupt.
4 "Their deeds do not permit them
to return to their God.
A spirit of prostitution is in their heart;
they do not acknowledge the LORD." (Hos. 5:1-4)

The people have followed along with the corruption of the priests, seeking out and worshipping other gods: *"Israel's arrogance testifies against them;*
the Israelites, even Ephraim, stumble in their sin;
Judah also stumbles with them.
6 When they go with their flocks and herds
to seek the Lord,
they will not find him;
he has withdrawn himself from them.
7 They are unfaithful to the Lord;
they give birth to illegitimate children.
When they celebrate their New Moon feasts,
he will devour their fields." (Hos. 5:4-7)

God will punish them, not to seek vengeance but to wake them up to repentance and reclaim them: *"For I will be like a lion to Ephraim,*
like a great lion to Judah.
I will tear them to pieces and go away;
I will carry them off, with no one to rescue them.
15 Then I will return to my lair
until they have borne their guilt
and seek my face—
in their misery
they will earnestly seek me." (Hos. 5:14-15)

Jesus later quotes this passage in Hosea, for He was convinced that the prople had tiotally missed the "message" that God had proclaimed to them as to the desires of His heart (Matthew 9:13 "But go and learn what this means*: 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.' For I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners."*) God tells Hosea His true desire: *"Come, let us return to the Lord.*
He has torn us to pieces
but he will heal us;
he has injured us

but he will bind up our wounds.
2 After two days he will revive us;
on the third day he will restore us,
that we may live in his presence.
3 Let us acknowledge the Lord;
let us press on to acknowledge him.
As surely as the sun rises,
he will appear;
he will come to us like the winter rains,
like the spring rains that water the earth."
4 "What can I do with you, Ephraim?
What can I do with you, Judah?
Your love is like the morning mist,
like the early dew that disappears.
5 Therefore I cut you in pieces with my prophets,
I killed you with the words of my mouth—
then my judgments go forth like the sun.
6 For I desire mercy, not sacrifice,
and acknowledgment of God rather than burnt offerings.
7 As at Adam, they have broken the covenant;
they were unfaithful to me there." (Hos 6:1-7).



http://talesfromamother.blogspot.com/2012/11/hosea-bible-in-90-days.html

God sees their hearts, and is saddened and angered that His people turn to their "kings" and not to Him as their true King, that they olose themselves in "partying" and self indulgence rather than seeking the very heart of God:
"They practice deceit,
thieves break into houses,
bandits rob in the streets;

2 but they do not realize
that I remember all their evil deeds.
Their sins engulf them;
they are always before me.
3 “They delight the king with their wickedness,
the princes with their lies.
4 They are all adulterers,
burning like an oven
whose fire the baker need not stir
from the kneading of the dough till it rises.
5 On the day of the festival of our king
the princes become inflamed with wine,
and he joins hands with the mockers.
6 Their hearts are like an oven;
they approach him with intrigue.
Their passion smolders all night;
in the morning it blazes like a flaming fire.
7 All of them are hot as an oven;
they devour their rulers.
All their kings fall,
and none of them calls on me.” (Hos. 7:1-7).

None of them call on the Lord (verse 7) because they are so busy with their own self-indulgence and sin that they never think to seek out the One who would bring them real peace and true prosperity.

And the very heart of God is saddened beciuase of the mindless self destruction of His people, who sek to “slash themselves” (verse 14) as a part of the rituals of pagan religion. He knows they are preparing for failure and misery, yet go on with their sin and self- destruction:

“Woe to them,
because they have strayed from me!
Destruction to them,
because they have rebelled against me!
I long to redeem them
but they speak about me falsely.
14 They do not cry out to me from their hearts
but wail on their beds.
They slash themselves, appealing to their gods
for grain and new wine,
but they turn away from me.
15 I trained them and strengthened their arms,
but they plot evil against me.
16 They do not turn to the Most High;
they are like a faulty bow.
Their leaders will fall by the sword
because of their insolent words.
For this they will be ridiculed
in the land of Egypt.” (Hos. 7:13-16)

There is a moral order ansd structure to the universe. When we decide to ignore it, we do so at our own peril. Israel has chosen, as a people, to pursue godlessness and selfishness- to use their status a a chosen tpeople to be people of “privilege” rather than people who are “called out” to be a blessing to the nations. When they lost their moral compass and abandoned God, they condemned themselves to misery, despair and fruitless lives. God sees this clearly, even though they cannot. He speaks to them through Hosea, hoping that somehow He can capture their attention and reclaim their hearts: *“They sow the wind*
and reap the whirlwind.
The stalk has no head;
it will produce no flour.
Were it to yield grain,
foreigners would swallow it up.
8 Israel is swallowed up;
now she is among the nations
like something no one wants.
9 For they have gone up to Assyria
like a wild donkey wandering alone.
Ephraim has sold herself to lovers.
10 Although they have sold themselves among the nations,
I will now gather them together.
They will begin to waste away
under the oppression of the mighty king.
11 “Though Ephraim built many altars for sin offerings,
these have become altars for sinning.
12 I wrote for them the many things of my law,
but they regarded them as something foreign.
13 Though they offer sacrifices as gifts to me,
and though they eat the meat,
the Lord is not pleased with them.
Now he will remember their wickedness
and punish their sins:
They will return to Egypt.” (Hos. 8:7-13)

Revelation 1

I know I’m getting close to the end of my yearly Bible study when I reach Revelation. The phrase I use sometimes when reading the whole Bible is from “In the beginning to Amen”. We had the occasion and privilege to read the whole Bible several times at my home church in a Bible Marathon- we read the Word continuouslyout loud on the steps of the church, several times 24 hours a day, and the last two times about 18 hours per day. It was a great thrill to me to read the words of Revelation 21 twice, and to finish the reading. We received so many blessings from “faithfully proclaiming the Word” and including so many “friends of the church” in our efforts. This effort was timed to end right before that National Day of Prayer each year.

The Book of Revelation, like Daniel, is a series of “apocalyptic visions”- visions of the last days of the earth as we now know it. The visions that were given to Daniel, John and likely others were God’s way of showing a “film” or a “movie” of the end,

but the interpretation of this vision or vsions was largely withheld from the one receiving it. The one receiving this insight tried as best they could to describe it, or to share whatever interpretation they might have been given, but much of these visions remains a mystery despite our best efforts or desire to interpret them. John's message, though, was a "practical" and short term one in addition to the visions of the apocalypse itself. The first section of the book is a series of comments and warnings to the "seven churches" which were in existence at the time of the witing of this book (AD 100-300?). As usual, the "higher ciritcs and scholars" generally reject the authorship as that of John the apostle, for a variety of reasons that only they hold dear (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Book_of_Revelation).

Right away in this book we feel both the urgency of the moment and the authority of this vision and "revelation", since the author clearly identifies the true author as Jesus Himself :
"The revelation from Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show his servants what must soon take place. He made it known by sending his angel to his servant John, 2 who testifies to everything he saw—that is, the word of God and the testimony of Jesus Christ. 3 Blessed is the one who reads aloud the words of this prophecy, and blessed are those who hear it and take to heart what is written in it, because the time is near." (Rev. 1:1-3)

John again identifies his revaltion as having come from Jesus Himself, and is writing specifically to the "seven churches" which he willname induividually later as he relays the message from the Lord to them: *"John,*
To the seven churches in the province of Asia:
Grace and peace to you from him who is, and who was, and who is to come, and from the seven spirits[a] before his throne, 5 and from Jesus Christ, who is the faithful witness, the firstborn from the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth.
To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood, 6 and has made us to be a kingdom and priests to serve his God and Father—to him be glory and power for ever and ever! Amen.
7 "Look, he is coming with the clouds,"
and "every eye will see him,
even those who pierced him";
and all peoples on earth "will mourn because of him."
So shall it be! Amen.
8 "I am the Alpha and the Omega," says the Lord God, "who is, and who was, and who is to come, the Almighty." (Rev. 1:4-8)

John explains where he is and why- he is writing from exile on the island of Patmos- presumable punishment for his faithful witness, and he describes the appearance of the person of Jesus who revals Himself, and symbolically the "seven" that he is speaking to:
"I, John, your brother and companion in the suffering and kingdom and patient endurance that are ours in Jesus, was on the island of Patmos because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus. 10 On the Lord's Day I was in the Spirit, and I heard behind me a loud voice like a trumpet, 11 which said: "Write on a scroll what you see and send it to the seven churches: to Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia and Laodicea."

12 I turned around to see the voice that was speaking to me. And when I turned I saw seven golden lampstands, 13 and among the lampstands was someone like a son of man,[d] dressed in a robe reaching down to his feet and with a golden sash around his chest. 14 The hair on his head was white like wool, as white as snow, and his eyes were like blazing fire. 15 His feet were like bronze glowing in a furnace, and his voice was like the sound of rushing waters. 16 In his right hand he held seven stars, and coming out of his mouth was a sharp, double-edged sword. His face was like the sun shining in all its brilliance. 17 When I saw him, I fell at his feet as though dead. Then he placed his right hand on me and said: "Do not be afraid. I am the First and the Last. 18 I am the Living One; I was dead, and now look, I am alive for ever and ever! And I hold the keys of death and Hades. 19 "Write, therefore, what you have seen, what is now and what will take place later. 20 The mystery of the seven stars that you saw in my right hand and of the seven golden lampstands is this: The seven stars are the angels of the seven churches, and the seven lampstands are the seven churches." (Rev. 1:9-20)

Hosea 9-11 December 11, 2014 Revelation 2

Becaue of Israel's continuous sin and abandonment of their God, punishment is deserved and is coming: *"The days of punishment are coming,*
the days of reckoning are at hand.
Let Israel know this.
Because your sins are so many
and your hostility so great,
the prophet is considered a fool,
the inspired person a maniac.
8 The prophet, along with my God,
is the watchman over Ephraim,
yet snares await him on all his paths,
and hostility in the house of his God.
9 They have sunk deep into corruption,
as in the days of Gibeah.
God will remember their wickedness
and punish them for their sins." (Hos. 9:7-9)

What may seem to us to be "trivial" and inconsequential is viewed differently by God. All sin is the same to Him- all leads to death and separation from His comforting fellowship- all of it ultimately cost Him the ultimate sacrifice of His Son!

When God turns His back to the people, they wither and die- even though they do not realize how serious their sin is. They go on sinning, wondering why they no longer are "in control" of their lives. God sees and withdraws Himself, and the results are tragic and disastrous:
"Because of all their wickedness in Gilgal,
I hated them there.
Because of their sinful deeds,
I will drive them out of my house.
I will no longer love them;
all their leaders are rebellious.
16 Ephraim is blighted,

their root is withered,
they yield no fruit.
Even if they bear children,
I will slay their cherished offspring.”
17 My God will reject them
because they have not obeyed him;
they will be wanderers among the nations.” (Hos. 9:15-17)

God recounts the history of His people and His relationship with them. They started as a flourishing vive, full of life and promise. They then abandoned His way, and chased after other “gods”, and the results were both predictable and catastrophic. God cannot and will not be ignored:
“Israel was a spreading vine;
he brought forth fruit for himself.
As his fruit increased,
he built more altars;
as his land prospered,
he adorned his sacred stones.
2 Their heart is deceitful,
and now they must bear their guilt.
The Lord will demolish their altars
and destroy their sacred stones.
3 Then they will say, “We have no king
because we did not revere the Lord.
But even if we had a king,
what could he do for us?”
4 They make many promises,
take false oaths
and make agreements;
therefore lawsuits spring up
like poisonous weeds in a plowed field.
5 The people who live in Samaria fear
for the calf-idol of Beth Aven.
Its people will mourn over it,
and so will its idolatrous priests,
those who had rejoiced over its splendor,
because it is taken from them into exile.
6 It will be carried to Assyria
as tribute for the great king.
Ephraim will be disgraced;
Israel will be ashamed of its foreign alliances.
7 Samaria’s king will be destroyed,
swept away like a twig on the surface of the waters.
8 The high places of wickedness will be destroyed—
it is the sin of Israel.
Thorns and thistles will grow up
and cover their altars.
Then they will say to the mountains, “Cover us!”
and to the hills, “Fall on us!” (Hos 10:1-8).

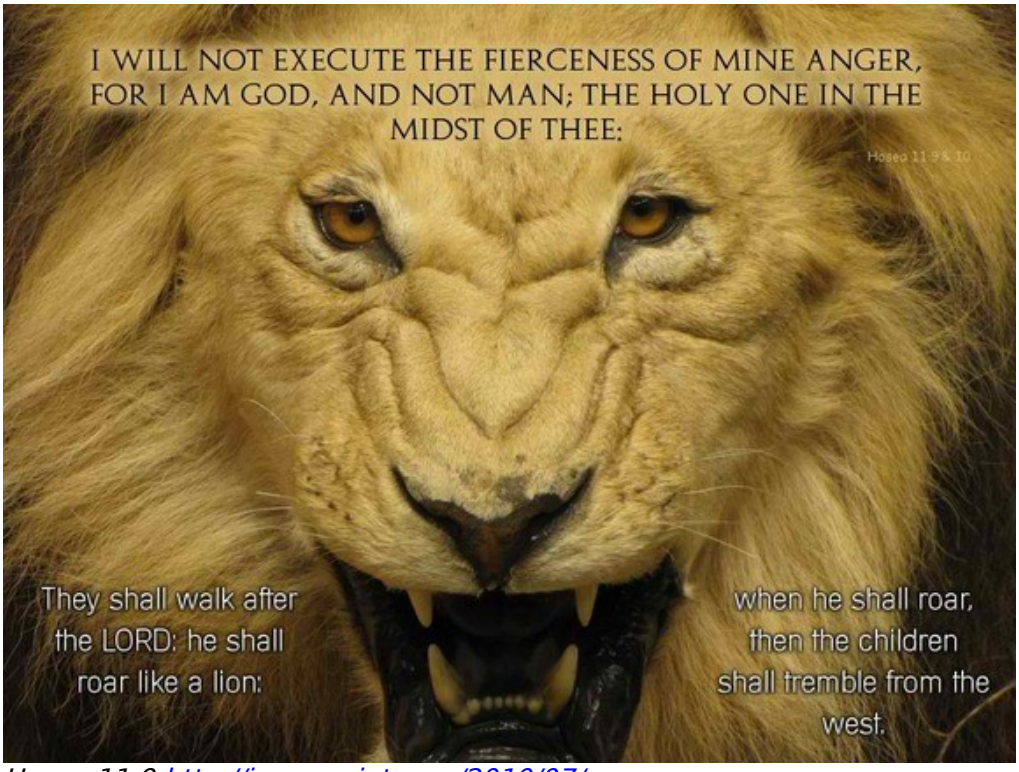
Verse 8 may have been part of the inspiration and source for the popular folk song "O Sinner Man, Where You Gonna Run To?" Some critics feel the inspiration was from the book of Revelation (http://www.24thstate.com/2010/08/sinnerman-where-you-gonna-run-to.html; http://www.lyricsmode.com/lyrics/l/les_baxter/sinner_man.html):
"Oh sinner man, where you gonna run to?
Oh sinner man, where you gonna run to?
Oh sinner man, where you gonna run to?
All on that day?
Run to the rock; the rock was a-melting
Run to the sea; the sea was a-boiling
Run to the moon; the moon was a-bleeding
Run to the Lord; Lord won't you hide me
Oh, sinner man, you oughta been a-praying"

God pleads with the people to "siw righteousness" and yet the people pursue evil instead and "plant wickedness". The cycle continues, to the detriment of the spiritual and physical well being of God's people. God must have wondeed if these stubborn people He made would ever learn what was truly good for them:
"Sow righteousness for yourselves,
reap the fruit of unfailing love,
and break up your unplowed ground;
for it is time to seek the Lord,
until he comes
and showers his righteousness on you.
13 But you have planted wickedness,
you have reaped evil,
you have eaten the fruit of deception.
Because you have depended on your own strength
and on your many warriors,
14 the roar of battle will rise against your people,
so that all your fortresses will be devastated—
as Shalman devastated Beth Arbel on the day of battle,
when mothers were dashed to the ground with their children." (Hos. 10:12-14)

Those who doudt that God's love is ever clearly revealed in the Hebrew Scriptures should read and study Hosea 11 carefully. Thei beautiful poem describes just how God loved Israel as a loving parent cares for a child:
"When Israel was a child, I loved him,
and out of Egypt I called my son.
2 But the more they were called,
the more they went away from me.
They sacrificed to the Baals
and they burned incense to images.
3 It was I who taught Ephraim to walk,
taking them by the arms;
but they did not realize
it was I who healed them.
4 I led them with cords of human kindness,
with ties of love.
To them I was like one who lifts

a little child to the cheek,
and I bent down to feed them.
5 “Will they not return to Egypt
and will not Assyria rule over them
because they refuse to repent?
6 A sword will flash in their cities;
it will devour their false prophets
and put an end to their plans.
7 My people are determined to turn from me.
Even though they call me God Most High,
I will by no means exalt them.
8 “How can I give you up, Ephraim?
How can I hand you over, Israel?
How can I treat you like Admah?
How can I make you like Zeboyim?
My heart is changed within me;
all my compassion is aroused.
9 I will not carry out my fierce anger,
nor will I devastate Ephraim again.
For I am God, and not a man—
the Holy One among you.
I will not come against their cities.
10 They will follow the Lord;
he will roar like a lion.
When he roars,
his children will come trembling from the west.
11 They will come from Egypt,
trembling like sparrows,
from Assyria, fluttering like doves.
I will settle them in their homes,”
declares the Lord.” (Hos 11:1-11)

Yet amazingly, these stubborn “children” persist in their sin:
“Ephraim has surrounded me with lies,
Israel with deceit.
And Judah is unruly against God,
even against the faithful Holy One.” (Hos.11:12).



Hosea 11:9 http://icrosspoint.com/2010/07/

This reminds me of the saying about the person who lied so much and so well that they would lie, even when the truth would serve them better. This pattern of disobedience as a life style was difficult even for God, and must have ried His patience endlessly!

Revelation 2

Four of the "seven churches" are addressed in revelation 2: 1) Ephesus; 2) Smyrna; 3) Pergamum, and lastly 4) Thyatira. God reveals to Joh His view of the true spiritual state of each of these churches, both the triumphs and tragedies. Just as is true today, each church had a different "personality" and differing strengths and weaknesses. It is a challenge for all of the bodies of believers to fearlessly address weaknesses, and not simply "rest" on the strengths that exist. The Kingdom is only built well with those able to see and address the areas that are in need of repentance, rebuilding or revisioning.

To the church in Ephesus Jesus says: *"To the angel of the church in Ephesus write: These are the words of him who holds the seven stars in his right hand and walks among the seven golden lampstands. 2 I know your deeds, your hard work and your perseverance. I know that you cannot tolerate wicked people, that you have tested those who claim to be apostles but are not, and have found them false. 3 You have persevered and have endured hardships for my name, and have not grown weary. 4 Yet I hold this against you: You have forsaken the love you had at first. 5 Consider how far you have fallen! Repent and do the things you did at first. If you do not repent, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place. 6 But you*

have this in your favor: You hate the practices of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate." (Rev. 2:1-6)

This is almost like the stories of "good news" and "bad news". Both are ususally valid and must be heard. We cannot ignore the value of the good news, but must also deal with the bad news as well. The church in Ephesus was commended for "perseverance" and "hard work", but had lost their "first love". The excitement of their first encounter with the loving, forgiving God had faded, and now they had sunk into the dreary world of "things as usual". Yet they hated the "practices of the Nicolaitans". Several theories have been advanced as to wht these practices were (http://www.gotquestions.org/Nicolaitans.html).

Jesus then reminds us that our goal is "victory", and that those who achieve victory will enjoy fellowship with Him and eat from the tree of life: *"Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To the one who is victorious, I will give the right to eat from the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God."* (Rev. 2:7). Does this mean that only the talented, the beautiful, the high achievers, and the "winners" will be saved? Certainly not! The victory here is the victory that we share with Him who overcomes- it is His strength and righteousness that gives us victory!

The Church in Smyrna is commended for their willingness to suffer for the glory of the Lord and His kingdom. Jesus reminds them that their victory will be lasting: *"To the angel of the church in Smyrna write: These are the words of him who is the First and the Last, who died and came to life again. 9 I know your afflictions and your poverty—yet you are rich! I know about the slander of those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan. 10 Do not be afraid of what you are about to suffer. I tell you, the devil will put some of you in prison to test you, and you will suffer persecution for ten days. Be faithful, even to the point of death, and I will give you life as your victor's crown. 11 Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches. The one who is victorious will not be hurt at all by the second death."* (Rev. 2:8-11) This "second death" which we see referred to several times in this book, is most likely a reference to separation from God, which occurs after the first "physical" death (http://www.gotquestions.org/second-death.html).

The pattern in the words to the church in Pergamum is similar to that given to the church in Ephesus- both "good news" and "bad news". The good news concerns their "faithful witness", even in the face of Satan himself. The "bad news" is the practices of some who follow Ballam and others the Nicolaitans: *"To the angel of the church in Pergamum write:*
These are the words of him who has the sharp, double-edged sword. 13 I know where you live—where Satan has his throne. Yet you remain true to my name. You did not renounce your faith in me, not even in the days of Antipas, my faithful witness, who was put to death in your city—where Satan lives.
14 Nevertheless, I have a few things against you: There are some among you who hold to the teaching of Balaam, who taught Balak to entice the Israelites to sin so that they ate food sacrificed to idols and committed sexual immorality. 15 Likewise, you also have those who hold to the teaching of the Nicolaitans. 16 Repent

therefore! Otherwise, I will soon come to you and will fight against them with the sword of my mouth.
17 Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To the one who is victorious, I will give some of the hidden manna. I will also give that person a white stone with a new name written on it, known only to the one who receives it." (Rev. 2:12-17). Here we see one of the "amazing rtreasures" of Scripture in verse 17. Apparently we have a "new name" known only to God which will be revealed to us when we enter into His presence. I wonder what mine is!

Lastly we see the words to the church in Thyatira, which is commended for growing faith, love, service and perseverance. The downfall- or bad news- is that some in the church are following a "prophetess" who is appropriately named Jezebel, who is misleading some in the church. Those not under the influence of this false prophetess are told to simply "persevere" to the end. Once again, Jesus promises great reward to those who endure and resist the devil: *"To the angel of the church in Thyatira write:*
These are the words of the Son of God, whose eyes are like blazing fire and whose feet are like burnished bronze. 19 I know your deeds, your love and faith, your service and perseverance, and that you are now doing more than you did at first. 20 Nevertheless, I have this against you: You tolerate that woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophet. By her teaching she misleads my servants into sexual immorality and the eating of food sacrificed to idols. 21 I have given her time to repent of her immorality, but she is unwilling. 22 So I will cast her on a bed of suffering, and I will make those who commit adultery with her suffer intensely, unless they repent of her ways. 23 I will strike her children dead. Then all the churches will know that I am he who searches hearts and minds, and I will repay each of you according to your deeds.
24 Now I say to the rest of you in Thyatira, to you who do not hold to her teaching and have not learned Satan's so-called deep secrets, 'I will not impose any other burden on you, 25 except to hold on to what you have until I come.' (Rev. 2:18-25)

Once again we see the wonderful promises reserved for those who are "victorious": *"To the one who is victorious and does my will to the end, I will give authority over the nations— 27 that one 'will rule them with an iron scepter and will dash them to pieces like pottery'[b]—just as I have received authority from my Father. 28 I will also give that one the morning star. 29 Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches."* (Rev 2:26-29) Scholars have debated the meaning of the "morning star" in verse 28, suggesting that the star is either Jesus Himself, or the great victory at the resurrection (https://www.christiancourier.com/articles/1105-what-is-the-morning-star).

http://tonys2cents.blogspot.com/2008/10/crazy-long-post-re-revelation-28-17.html

Hosea 12-14 December 12, 2014 Revelation 3

"Ephriam" is one of several Biblical names for Israel. Here Ephriam is personified as a child of God, and God is explaining the story of His actions and interactions with this belligerently disobedient child, which God loves betond measure and is trying to "awaken and correct": [a]1 Ephraim feeds on the wind;
he pursues the east wind all day
and multiplies lies and violence.
He makes a treaty with Assyria
and sends olive oil to Egypt.
2 The Lord has a charge to bring against Judah;
he will punish Jacob[b] according to his ways
and repay him according to his deeds.
3 In the womb he grasped his brother's heel;
as a man he struggled with God.
4 He struggled with the angel and overcame him;
he wept and begged for his favor.
He found him at Bethel
and talked with him there—
5 the Lord God Almighty,
the Lord is his name!
6 But you must return to your God;
maintain love and justice,
and wait for your God always." (Hos. 12:1-6).

Just as Jacob grasped Essau by the heel, and later struggled with God (wrestled Him!) and became "Israel" (one who struggles/strives with God), Ephriam has rebelled and must be brought back to the care and love of the Creator. God clearly tells the people "you must return to your God" (verse 6). This is the object and goal of the punishment and suffering that Ephriam now endures.

Ephriam insists on idol worship, even when God made it abundantly clear that this is an offense to Him, such an offense that he named it first in the Commandments. Yet Ephriam persists and must be brought back to a right relationship with God- this will unfortunately be a painful correction:

“When Ephraim spoke, people trembled;
he was exalted in Israel.
But he became guilty of Baal worship and died.
2 Now they sin more and more;
they make idols for themselves from their silver,
cleverly fashioned images,
all of them the work of craftsmen.
It is said of these people,
“They offer human sacrifices!
They kiss[d] calf-idols!”
3 Therefore they will be like the morning mist,
like the early dew that disappears,
like chaff swirling from a threshing floor,
like smoke escaping through a window.
4 “But I have been the Lord your God
ever since you came out of Egypt.
You shall acknowledge no God but me,
no Savior except me.
5 I cared for you in the wilderness,
in the land of burning heat.
6 When I fed them, they were satisfied;
when they were satisfied, they became proud;
then they forgot me.
7 So I will be like a lion to them,
like a leopard I will lurk by the path.
8 Like a bear robbed of her cubs,
I will attack them and rip them open;
like a lion I will devour them—
a wild animal will tear them apart.
9 “You are destroyed, Israel,
because you are against me, against your helper.” (Hos. 13:1-9).

The reason Ephriam is suffering is because of her own choice- verse 9 states this in unmistakable terms “You are destroyed, Israel, because you are against me, against your helper”. Israel has fooilsihly and persistently chosen idols over God, dearh over life, and error and ignorance over truth and knowledge.

God, ever faithful and ever the covenant maker and keeper, will restore them- but at the price of the suffering the people have brought on themselves:

“I will deliver this people from the power of the grave;
I will redeem them from death.
Where, O death, are your plagues?
Where, O grave, is your destruction?
“I will have no compassion,
15 even though he thrives among his brothers.

An east wind from the Lord will come,
    blowing in from the desert;
his spring will fail
    and his well dry up.
His storehouse will be plundered
    of all its treasures.
16 The people of Samaria must bear their guilt,
    because they have rebelled against their God.
They will fall by the sword;
    their little ones will be dashed to the ground,
    their pregnant women ripped open."(Hos. 13:14-16)

If, and when, Israel repents and turns away from sin and disobedience and towards the saving and healing God, then restoration and forgiveness will be obtained. God is ever ready and willing to embrace and bless His people, but they must turn to Him to receive the blessings and power over sin that he so freely gives:
"Return, Israel, to the Lord your God.
    Your sins have been your downfall!
2 Take words with you
    and return to the Lord.
Say to him:
    "Forgive all our sins
and receive us graciously,
    that we may offer the fruit of our lips.
3 Assyria cannot save us;
    we will not mount warhorses.
We will never again say 'Our gods'
    to what our own hands have made,
    for in you the fatherless find compassion."
4 "I will heal their waywardness
    and love them freely,
    for my anger has turned away from them.
5 I will be like the dew to Israel;
    he will blossom like a lily.
Like a cedar of Lebanon
    he will send down his roots;
6   his young shoots will grow.
His splendor will be like an olive tree,
    his fragrance like a cedar of Lebanon." (Hos. 14:1-6)

Assyria, with all its might, power and influence, cannot save. Our "gods" cannot save- only the Craetor of the universe itself can do this!

What is the conclusion? Simply to walk in the ways of God, the ways that lead to righteousness, peace, healing and forgiveness:
"Who is wise? Let them realize these things.
    Who is discerning? Let them understand.
The ways of the LORD are right;
    the righteous walk in them,
    but the rebellious stumble in them." (Hos. 14:9)

Revelation 3

Three more churches- three more commentaries on the gifts, graces, strengths and weaknesses of these 'families of faith". Jesus speaks to the "angel" of each church by name- the angel being a symbolic representation of the nature and character of each church.

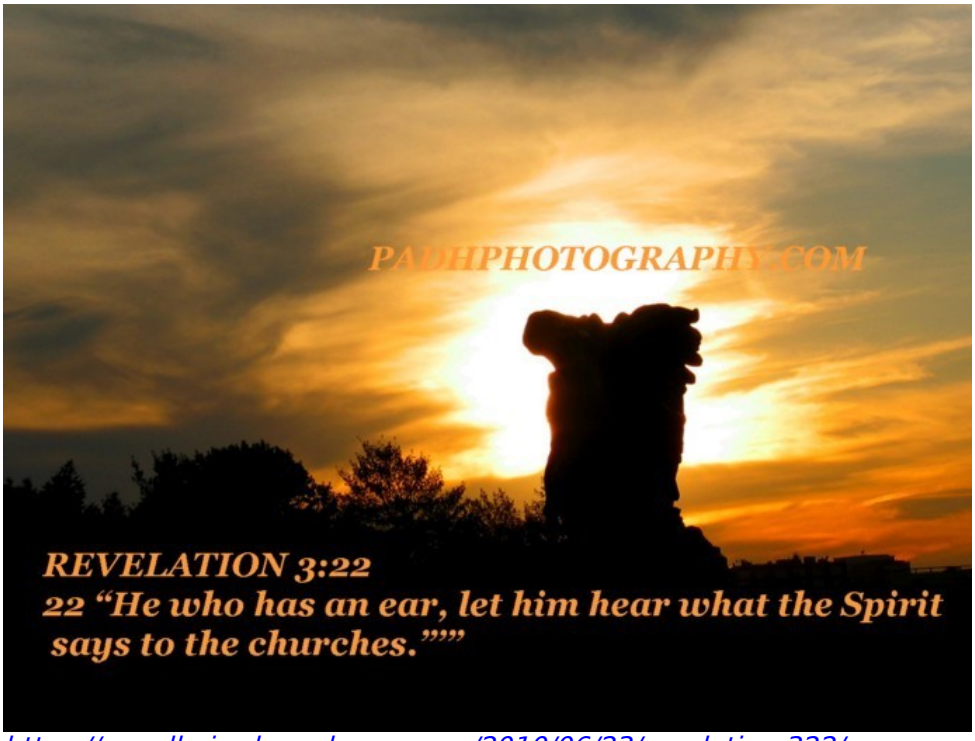
First, Jesus speaks to the church in Sardis. Thei main problem is that they are a 'dead" church. The joy and enthusiasm that they once felt and expressed are gone, and now they are 'sleepwalking". Jesus urges them to awaken and reclaim their joy and enthusiasm:
"To the angel of the church in Sardis write:
These are the words of him who holds the seven spirits of God and the seven stars. I know your deeds; you have a reputation of being alive, but you are dead. 2 Wake up! Strengthen what remains and is about to die, for I have found your deeds unfinished in the sight of my God. 3 Remember, therefore, what you have received and heard; hold it fast, and repent. But if you do not wake up, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what time I will come to you.
4 Yet you have a few people in Sardis who have not soiled their clothes. They will walk with me, dressed in white, for they are worthy. 5 The one who is victorious will, like them, be dressed in white. I will never blot out the name of that person from the book of life, but will acknowledge that name before my Father and his angels. 6 Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches." (Rev. 3:1-6)

The church in Philadelhia seems to have lost their 'ernergy" or strength. They have been faithful, and have avoided the wiles and traps of Satan and his minions, yet they need help to enter the door that Jesus holds iopen for them. We must all walk through this door! It leads to life, true life that will empower us forever:
"To the angel of the church in Philadelphia write:
These are the words of him who is holy and true, who holds the key of David. What he opens no one can shut, and what he shuts no one can open. 8 I know your deeds. See, I have placed before you an open door that no one can shut. I know that you have little strength, yet you have kept my word and have not denied my name. 9 I will make those who are of the synagogue of Satan, who claim to be Jews though they are not, but are liars—I will make them come and fall down at your feet and acknowledge that I have loved you. 10 Since you have kept my command to endure patiently, I will also keep you from the hour of trial that is going to come on the whole world to test the inhabitants of the earth.
11 I am coming soon. Hold on to what you have, so that no one will take your crown. 12 The one who is victorious I will make a pillar in the temple of my God. Never again will they leave it. I will write on them the name of my God and the name of the city of my God, the new Jerusalem, which is coming down out of heaven from my God; and I will also write on them my new name. 13 Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches." (Rev. 3:7-13)

The last church to be addressed by Jesus is the church in Laodecia. The issue with this family of believers is the spiritual "lukewarmness". The church, like its members, can fall into the trap of "half hearted" obedience. To partially obey is essentially to disobey. God is certainly worthy of our best. Oswald Chembers wrote these words about Ephesians 6:13;18 in his classic book of devotions "My Utmost

for His Highest": *"God's permissive will is the means whereby His sons and daughters are to be manifested. We are not to be like jelly-fish saying, "It's the Lord's will." We have not to put up a fight before God, not to wrestle with God, but to wrestle before God with things. Beware of squatting lazily before God instead of putting up a glorious fight so that you may lay hold of His strength."* The words in verse 16 that are translated in the NIV as "spit you from my mouth" are also rendered "vomited out of my mouth". God is repulsed by our half hearted, low risk, comfort seeking and feeble 'responses" to His call on our lives. The church in Laodicea had to be reminde of this grat truth as well:

"To the angel of the church in Laodicea write:
These are the words of the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the ruler of God's creation. 15 I know your deeds, that you are neither cold nor hot. I wish you were either one or the other! 16 So, because you are lukewarm—neither hot nor cold—I am about to spit you out of my mouth. 17 You say, 'I am rich; I have acquired wealth and do not need a thing.' But you do not realize that you are wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked. 18 I counsel you to buy from me gold refined in the fire, so you can become rich; and white clothes to wear, so you can cover your shameful nakedness; and salve to put on your eyes, so you can see.
19 Those whom I love I rebuke and discipline. So be earnest and repent. 20 Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with that person, and they with me.
21 To the one who is victorious, I will give the right to sit with me on my throne, just as I was victorious and sat down with my Father on his throne. 22 Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches." (Rev. 3:14-22)



https://angelhairpd.wordpress.com/2010/06/23/revelation-322/

Joel 1-3 December 13, 2014 Revelation 4

Just after Malachi reports to us the great promise God made about “testing Him” in the giving of tithes, we find this statement: *“I will prevent pests from devouring your crops, and the vines in your fields will not drop their fruit before it is ripe," says the LORD Almighty.”* (Malachi 3:11). We may also remember that locusts were on of the ten plagues of Egypt (Exodus10:1-20). The dependence of God’s people on the land was a fact they dealt with every day. If rain was withheld- or simply did not fall, if insects came in number, or if the weather was not agreeable the crops (and the people) would suffer greatly. The image we see in Joel 1 is a terrifying one- the vast swarm of locusts could only bring destruction and famine in their wake.

“1 The word of the Lord that came to Joel son of Pethuel.
2 Hear this, you elders;
listen, all who live in the land.
Has anything like this ever happened in your days
or in the days of your ancestors?
3 Tell it to your children,
and let your children tell it to their children,
and their children to the next generation.
4 What the locust swarm has left
the great locusts have eaten;
what the great locusts have left
the young locusts have eaten;
what the young locusts have left
other locusts[a] have eaten.” (Joel 1:1-4)

As a sidenote, it is fascinating to me how many phrases, stories and ideas from Scripture find their way into everyday life. The gifted satirist Felicia Lamport (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Felicia_Lamport) even penned an article that appeared in Harper’s in 1959 called “The Plague of the Locus”. You can find a copy of this marvelously witty article here (http://harpers.org/archive/1959/11/the-plague-of-the-locus/). I suppose I admire her work so much because I am a great admirer of the well turned pun!

Joel’s message is both brief and powerful. He is categotrized as a “minor prophet” simply by the length of his book of prophesy. The call to repentance is striking in its imagery:

“Put on sackcloth, you priests, and mourn;
wail, you who minister before the altar.
Come, spend the night in sackcloth,
you who minister before my God;
for the grain offerings and drink offerings
are withheld from the house of your God.
14 Declare a holy fast;
call a sacred assembly.
Summon the elders
and all who live in the land
to the house of the Lord your God,
and cry out to the Lord.
15 Alas for that day!

For the day of the Lord is near;
it will come like destruction from the Almighty." (Joel 1:13-15)

Here we see that the religious eladers, the priests and elders, are called on to mourn and ask God for forgiveness and restoration. The "day of the Lord" will be a day of terrible judgment and punishment, a notion we see in other Scriptures (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Day_of_the_Lord) such as Isaiah 2:12*:"For the day of the LORD of hosts shall be upon every one that is proud and lofty, and upon every one that is lifted up; and he shall be brought low"* and Amos 5:18: *"Woe to you who long for the day of the LORD! Why do you long for the day of the LORD? That day will be darkness, not light"*

The day of the Lord will be a terrifying day of fire, destruction and judgment:

"Blow the trumpet in Zion;
sound the alarm on my holy hill.
Let all who live in the land tremble,
for the day of the Lord is coming.
It is close at hand—
2 a day of darkness and gloom,
a day of clouds and blackness.
Like dawn spreading across the mountains
a large and mighty army comes,
such as never was in ancient times
nor ever will be in ages to come.
3 Before them fire devours,
behind them a flame blazes.
Before them the land is like the garden of Eden,
behind them, a desert waste—
nothing escapes them.
4 They have the appearance of horses;
they gallop along like cavalry.
5 With a noise like that of chariots
they leap over the mountaintops,
like a crackling fire consuming stubble,
like a mighty army drawn up for battle.
6 At the sight of them, nations are in anguish;
every face turns pale." (Joel 2:1-6)

Only true repentance will avert further tragedy, and make possible restoration:

"Even now," declares the Lord,
"return to me with all your heart,
with fasting and weeping and mourning."
13 Rend your heart
and not your garments.
Return to the Lord your God,
for he is gracious and compassionate,
slow to anger and abounding in love,
and he relents from sending calamity.
14 Who knows? He may turn and relent
and leave behind a blessing—

grain offerings and drink offerings
for the Lord your God.
15 Blow the trumpet in Zion,
declare a holy fast,
call a sacred assembly.
16 Gather the people,
consecrate the assembly;
bring together the elders,
gather the children,
those nursing at the breast.
Let the bridegroom leave his room
and the bride her chamber.
17 Let the priests, who minister before the Lord,
weep between the portico and the altar.
Let them say, "Spare your people, Lord.
Do not make your inheritance an object of scorn,
a byword among the nations.
Why should they say among the peoples,
'Where is their God?'" (Joel 2:12-17).

The key is the heart of the people. God tells them to "rend your heart and not your garments" (verse 13). Only with a change in the heart, and not with external actions, will the people ever truly change from their selfish and stubborn ways and seek after the Lord their Creator!

God, ever generous and forgiving, promises a full restiration to the people that he loves so much:
"Then the Lord was jealous for his land
and took pity on his people.
19 The Lord replied to them:
"I am sending you grain, new wine and olive oil,
enough to satisfy you fully;
never again will I make you
an object of scorn to the nations.
20 "I will drive the northern horde far from you,
pushing it into a parched and barren land;
its eastern ranks will drown in the Dead Sea
and its western ranks in the Mediterranean Sea.
And its stench will go up;
its smell will rise."
Surely he has done great things!
21 Do not be afraid, land of Judah;
be glad and rejoice.
Surely the Lord has done great things!
22 Do not be afraid, you wild animals,
for the pastures in the wilderness are becoming green.
The trees are bearing their fruit;
the fig tree and the vine yield their riches.
23 Be glad, people of Zion,
rejoice in the Lord your God,

for he has given you the autumn rains
because he is faithful.
He sends you abundant showers,
both autumn and spring rains, as before.
24 The threshing floors will be filled with grain;
the vats will overflow with new wine and oil." (Joel 2:18-24).

We then see a wonderful promise- God, who has anointed the "few" with His Spirit- usually for a special purpose or mission, will unleash His Spirit on all His children. This promise we see fulfilled starting with the outpouring of the Spirit in Acts 2:
"And afterward,
I will pour out my Spirit on all people.
Your sons and daughters will prophesy,
your old men will dream dreams,
your young men will see visions.
29 Even on my servants, both men and women,
I will pour out my Spirit in those days." (Joel 2:28-29)
God, who is no "respecter of persons" (Acts 10:34) will pour out His Spirit on all- men and women, free and servant, old and young!

Then God promises to show "signs and wonders" to all- not as part of some cosmic "magic show or act" but to underline His power, glory and dominion over all that he has created- and then offers salvation to 'all who call on His Name":
"I will show wonders in the heavens
and on the earth,
blood and fire and billows of smoke.
31 The sun will be turned to darkness
and the moon to blood
before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the Lord.
32 And everyone who calls
on the name of the Lord will be saved;
for on Mount Zion and in Jerusalem
there will be deliverance,
as the Lord has said,
even among the survivors
whom the Lord calls." (Joel 2:30-32)

God will then exact judgment and punishment on those who were the enmies of Israel:
"In those days and at that time,
when I restore the fortunes of Judah and Jerusalem,
2 I will gather all nations
and bring them down to the Valley of Jehoshaphat.
There I will put them on trial
for what they did to my inheritance, my people Israel,
because they scattered my people among the nations
and divided up my land.
3 They cast lots for my people
and traded boys for prostitutes;
they sold girls for wine to drink.

4 “Now what have you against me, Tyre and Sidon and all you regions of Philistia? Are you repaying me for something I have done? If you are paying me back, I will swiftly and speedily return on your own heads what you have done. 5 For you took my silver and my gold and carried off my finest treasures to your temples. 6 You sold the people of Judah and Jerusalem to the Greeks, that you might send them far from their homeland.
7 “See, I am going to rouse them out of the places to which you sold them, and I will return on your own heads what you have done. 8 I will sell your sons and daughters to the people of Judah, and they will sell them to the Sabeans, a nation far away.” The Lord has spoken.
9 Proclaim this among the nations:
Prepare for war!
Rouse the warriors!
Let all the fighting men draw near and attack.
10 Beat your plowshares into swords
and your pruning hooks into spears.
Let the weakling say,
“I am strong!”
11 Come quickly, all you nations from every side,
and assemble there.
Bring down your warriors, Lord!” (Joel 3:1-11)

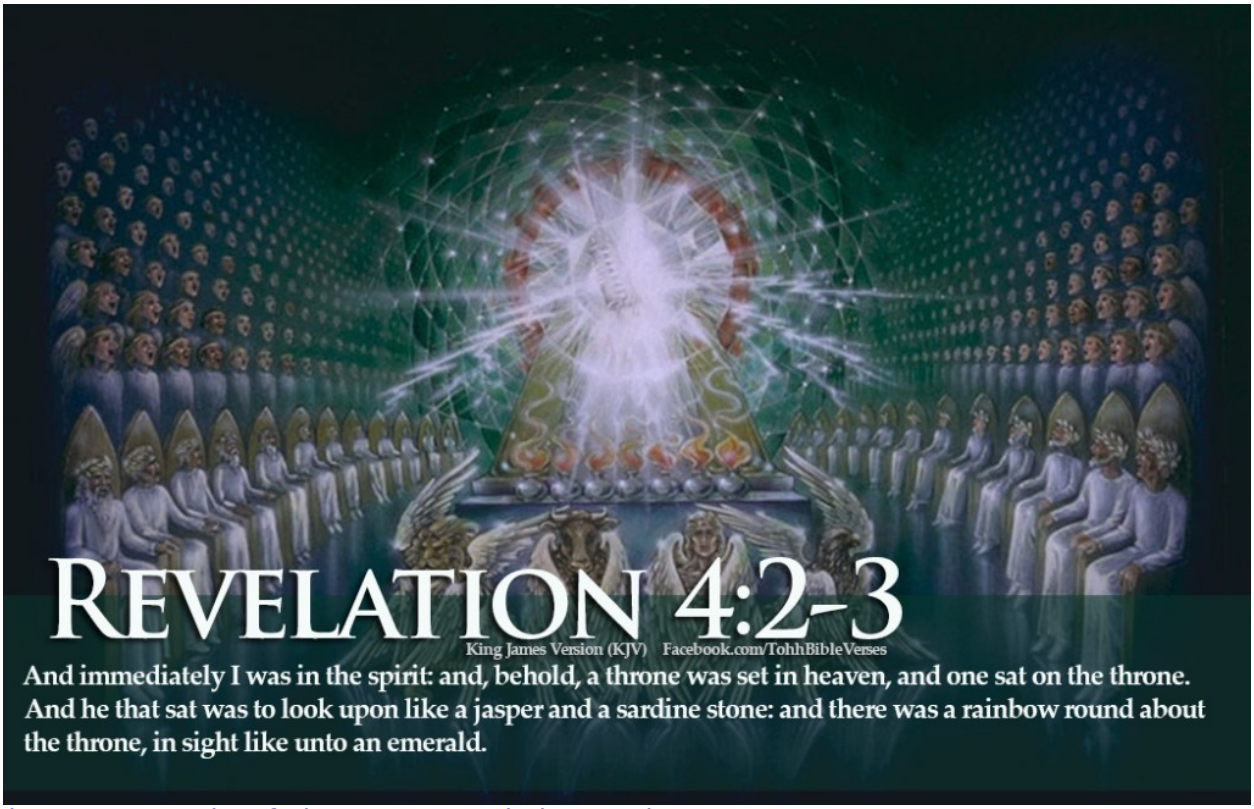
God will inhabit His “holy hill” and rule over a restored, grateful and joyful people:
“Then you will know that I, the LORD your God,
dwell in Zion, my holy hill.
Jerusalem will be holy;
never again will foreigners invade her.
18 “In that day the mountains will drip new wine,
and the hills will flow with milk;
all the ravines of Judah will run with water.
A fountain will flow out of the LORD’s house
and will water the valley of acacias.
19 But Egypt will be desolate,
Edom a desert waste,
because of violence done to the people of Judah,
in whose land they shed innocent blood.
20 Judah will be inhabited forever
and Jerusalem through all generations.
21 Shall I leave their innocent blood unavenged?
No, I will not.”
The LORD dwells in Zion! (Joel 3:17-21)

Revelation 4

John is shown the throne in heaven, with the Lord seated on it surrounded by the worshipping and adoring people he has saved by His might and mercy:
“ After this I looked, and there before me was a door standing open in heaven. And the voice I had first heard speaking to me like a trumpet said, “Come up here, and I

will show you what must take place after this.” 2 At once I was in the Spirit, and there before me was a throne in heaven with someone sitting on it. 3 And the one who sat there had the appearance of jasper and ruby. A rainbow that shone like an emerald encircled the throne. 4 Surrounding the throne were twenty-four other thrones, and seated on them were twenty-four elders. They were dressed in white and had crowns of gold on their heads. 5 From the throne came flashes of lightning, rumblings and peals of thunder. In front of the throne, seven lamps were blazing. These are the seven spirits of God. 6 Also in front of the throne there was what looked like a sea of glass, clear as crystal.
In the center, around the throne, were four living creatures, and they were covered with eyes, in front and in back. 7 The first living creature was like a lion, the second was like an ox, the third had a face like a man, the fourth was like a flying eagle. 8 Each of the four living creatures had six wings and was covered with eyes all around, even under its wings. Day and night they never stop saying:
“‘Holy, holy, holy
is the Lord God Almighty,’
who was, and is, and is to come.” (Rev. 4:1-8)

Whenever the four living creatures worships the Living God, it is a signal for the others gathered around to proclaim the worthiness, honor and glory that belong only to God and to the Lamb of God:
“Whenever the living creatures give glory, honor and thanks to him who sits on the throne and who lives for ever and ever, 10 the twenty-four elders fall down before him who sits on the throne and worship him who lives for ever and ever. They lay their crowns before the throne and say:
11 “You are worthy, our Lord and God,
to receive glory and honor and power,
for you created all things,
and by your will they were created
and have their being.” (Rev. 4:9-11)



http://www.workersforjesus.com/revelations4-6.htm

Amos 1-3 December 14, 2014 Revelation 5

The Ga Tech Wesley Foundation was the center of my undergraduate experience at Tech. I was never a member of a fraternity, but the residents of the Wesley Foundation (there were 5-6 of us in three rooms) we a tightly knit family. Bill Landiss was the campus minister, and had been the catalyst in my salvation experience at Camp Glisson some years earlier. Bill would give a series of lectures at the Foundation, among them were "Christianity 101", and several other topics including a study of Amos, which I remember to this day. Bill introduced me to the reality, richness and relevance of the Scriptures. This was my first experience with someone outside the traditional church who was both passionate and knowledgeable about God's Word.

Bill brough the messages of Amos alive to me. Amos was a humble "farmer, shepherd, fig dresser" who was called by God to procalim judgment against the rebellious, self centered and self righteous of his day. The call to social justice was a powerful one- and God had plenty to say about it to His reluctant people:
"The words of Amos, one of the shepherds of Tekoa—the vision he saw concerning Israel two years before the earthquake, when Uzziah was king of Judah and Jeroboam son of Jehoash was king of Israel.
2 He said:
"The Lord roars from Zion
and thunders from Jerusalem;
the pastures of the shepherds dry up,

and the top of Carmel withers." (Amos 1:1-2)